Zaldizko

Seriphyn Knight Chronicles
Vol: 1

Veronica Purcell

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Thank you to all my writing friends and everyone who encouraged this story.

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Other Works by the Author

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Everything Comes to Null

"No. It's as the Zaldizko Prophecy foretold." The man gasped with a dry crack in his voice.

His eyes reflected a scene of raging demon orange and red fire, engulfing four tall pillar moonstone towers that were crumbling down over devastated stone buildings. They were swarming with reptilian-winged demons that fought gargoyle animals and angels. The gargoyles were doing their best to protect what was left of the town.

Elsewhere, a magical effulgence of blue, green, and white was being cast as a light show where knights fought beasts and demons from Zyon. Pitiful human cries. Shouts filled with desperate bravado and dying honor. Terrifying and triumphant maniacal shrieking surrounded him.

A stench of spilled Solkind blood, bitter musk, burning oil, and foul offal stirred the air, with no sweetness to negate the potency.

The sky was black as sackcloth, with fire being the predominant light. It kept burning everything that had once mattered to the man.

He had no more spirit to protect the world he loved. His aged body was broken. All his sacred words were spent. The light of his faith had dwindled to a mere flicker. He would pass into the Chiorntex. Not even a memory of his name being left behind.

At least, that was what he had thought.

Purposefully, heavy footfalls came behind him. The man turned to see a face of someone he knew; a man who was now the Black Rider.

"Feel the pain of time," said the Black Rider, looming over his defeated form.

"This can't be!" The man was unwilling to see the truth.

The Black Rider's oppressive shadow was draining his warmth and hope.

"Everything comes to null."

The man braved a glance into the rider's eyes and saw... nothing.

"What have I done?" All the planning, fighting and good intentions

had brought to fruition a lie.

"Everything comes to null," the Black Rider said again as his shadowy hand pressed the man's forehead.

The man writhed about the ashen ground as he felt the excruciating ages of his time revert to null. The lingering memory in his mind was of a man with black hair and eyes within a picturesque mountain monastery.

"Famine, I'm sorry, please save us!" His last hope sailed through the air along with the ashes that was once his body.

The Black Rider stood over the precipice to watch his view of the world called Sol fade into the night.

Magism Annotations

Death's hasty notes on the different types of magic skills performed by magis. And other information of interest.

Chiorntex - Cosmos and universe.

Tsazcuth - Portals and connections through the Chirontex.

Magis - Practitioner of magic.

Magism - Laws and codes of conduct in applying magic derived from The Sacred Word.

Chi - A living person or creature's energy and life force. Note that undead creatures don't produce their own chi but exist on borrowing from the living.

The Sacred Word - Is the all-time book of magic and history, passed down and expanded from Grand Magis to another and stored within Gat Shiem. It contains every manner of known spells, knowledge of belief systems, religious text, rituals and prophesies. It's a one-stop shop outline for everything in Sol.

Grand Magis/Shuso - Head Monk of Gat Shiem and the Head of Sol Magis community. All laws and code of conduct for magic use is passed down to factions through the Gat Shiem Head Chain.

Gat Shiem - Magic headquarters and also a place where magic is the purest. A lot of senior magis end up taking a lifelong calling at Gat Shiem to master the ways of The Sacred Word and Cakra Magic.

Magic Skills

Force - Transmutation, transformation and telekinesis type of magic.

Elemental - Able to use the elements of the world to summon a desired result (e.g. call Fire, Wind, Earth, Water).

Semblance - Telepathy, illusions, mental imagery, enchantments, soul trapping and binding. There are objects that can be bound with a form of Semblance spell that doesn't require the User to be adept in the skill, but they have the sufficient mana to sustain the magic.

Cakra - Using the power of self to call upon a result. It requires the wisdom of a Magis to be able to summon the mana power within. Derived from Chakra.

Crown Cakra - Tapping into the mind to bring out a result. Side effect is either concussion or amnesia.

Eye Cakra - Focusing on the inner eye to reach a desired destination. A side effect is damage to the Caster's eyes, usually temporary.

Throat Cakra - Focusing on the throat to call truth, silence or invoke spells that require the sound of voice to produce a result. Side effect, nasty form of a laryngitis and possible damage to the tonsils.

Solar Plexus Cakra - Focuses on feelings in the gut to restore chi-health to another. Side effect - vomiting, constipation, re flux, hernias and other mild stomach complications.

Heart Cakra - The most dangerous of all Cakra magic, where a person focus on the power of their love to restore the chi of another at the moment of their death. Side effect - cost is the giving of life of the Caster. The more traumatic the death, the more focus is needed, and the Caster's life can be sacrificed in the process. A lot of hiras have this ability naturally.

Sacral Cakra - Transcendence into another time and space (form of time travel). Astral projection. It's rarely used. A Magis would have studied The Sacred Word for many years to understand the process of use. Generally, only skilled Monks trained at Gat Shiem have this ability. An exception is the one and only family who are genetically skilled. Side Effect - being stuck in the traveled time and space. Not able to reattach the soul back to the body. The current body is open to being a meat suit for formless demons to enter into.

Root Cakra - Generally known that only Gat Shiem's Shuso had the ability to use this power. It involved the temporary creation of time and space in parallel to one that existed. It seems some magis and demons may have this ability. To evoke this power is usually at the cost of the casters own body. The typical output of the power are Dimension Slips.

Talisman Magic - Uses the chanting of a passage from The Sacred Word to invoke a result. Generally to temporarily close off or open a way to somewhere or thing. It's a form of magic that can be used by low level mana Casters since the magic is bound to strips of blessed paper with a spell (typically protection) written on it, and called upon when the correct passage from The Sacred Word is spoken.

Gat Shiem

My name is Famine.

I come from a tranquil monastery called Gat Shiem, which covers the apex of a snowy mountain. Gigantic moonstone rock walls protect this place from Sol's harmful elements.

It is a blessed home that I'm grateful to wake up in. Especially on days like today, where the morning daylight warmed my small room, making it hard to leave my snugly blankets.

"Onii-san, I've finished pressing your pants." Pesti yawned before me, wiping sleep from his neutral-gray eyes.

I smiled at the sight of my baby brother's delicate and unassailable features, which would outdo the beauty of any princess.

"You're good at this." I praised him when I eventually rose from my futon to take my clothes from his arms.

He acknowledged the praise with another yawn, sweeping aside strands of silver fringe from his brows.

My hands ran over the crease free cloth of my neatly folded sackcloth tunic and long pants. I felt fortunate to share room with my brother, as he kept a meticulous order, reflecting the cleanliness of Sangha Hall's (our dull stone dormitory) ground floor.

We began our typical routine once we were dressed for duty. Pesti and I were tasked with the upkeep of the grounds and gardens around the shimmering sand-white splendor of Buddha's worship hall and Butsudan.

"Morning," I reverently greeted a shaven head monk dressed in a formal midnight blue kimono.

We repeated greetings to the other monks we passed on our way to the small alder log cabins, which were nestled within a belt of pine trees at the small glen near the back wall.

The crisp air invigorated my energies as I tended to the cabins' private rock gardens and trimmed the grass of the meditation grounds with Pesti.

"Morning Loppy," I greeted a spotty rabbit that rubbed against my sandals.

Pesti gently patted its head.

"Can you clear away the fallen leaves over there?" he politely asked the creature, his finger pointed to scattered nettle leaves littering the sand beds.

The rabbit hopped to the area and eagerly ate the leaves.

By mid-morning, we had cleaned all the rock gardens, the *Zendō* and surrounding areas.

My cheeks were flushed from the heat of the approaching noon sun. It was time for my regular visit with Buddha.

I packed away our cleaning tools in the tin garden shed behind the library moonstone pillar tower, and hurried to the Temizuya stone basin within the Central Courtyard to perform my ablution.

The placid lull about the Butsudan Hall's wide verandah was calming. I felt pure as I entered the worship hall and padded down the cool strip of floorboards that lead to our deity. I offered my thanks before a glorious gold and dark stone sitting Buddha, enshrined within nature's splendor of various colored flowers and lush foliage.

"Life's good, please keep it this way." I sealed my prayer with a clap; the sound echoing around the hall.

The smell of woody incense burning at the shrine filled my head with peace and a feeling of nostalgia. I relished the gentle rays of daylight warming the top of my head, which was bowed at Buddha's feet.

"It's nice, the earnest prayers from youngsters." I heard a papery voice behind me.

I greeted Shuso, our head monk, with a reverent prayer bow as he approached me from the other end of the hall.

"Famine. The pink angels are smiling down on us from the sky, looks like an eventful day awaits us. I saw your brothers at the Kuri with bellies crying for food," the elderly monk chuckled. "Aah such youth."

I acknowledged his metaphorical words with a cordial bow, then sprinted through the temple grounds to the Kuri, (the kitchen hall).

Its long rows of benches and dining tables were sure to be crowded. I would miss out on the ganmodoki if I didn't hurry.

I groaned. The sight of piddly amounts of rice remaining on the row

of buffet tables near the rice paper doors, upon my arrival, made my stomach growl.

"Damnit!" I hissed at the revelation of no ganmodoki. "Don't blame me if my afternoon duties are shoddy due to delirium!"

"Watch your manners, Famine. You sully your pretty face with foul complaints. Your black eyes and hair stand out like a hissy cat," said a shaven head monk. His droopy dog eyes were set with a cranky expression.

"I need protein only ganmodoki can give!"

I yelped at the curt slap he gave my skinny shoulders.

"Sorry Adams-san." I bowed.

I hurried to the back row of tables and benches, which my three brothers occupied.

"Dat's what yah get for prayin' too long, Famisto." War, my elder brother, teased me with choice bits of savory fried tofu dangling, deliberately, between his chopsticks.

I growled at his smug face.

Daylight accentuated the cocky expression in his green eyes. His spiky crop of flaming red hair added to his rugged manliness.

He shoved the ganmodoki into his mouth before I had a chance to steal it.

"Mean!" I sulked and slumped down on the bench next to Pesti who was disinterested in War's raillery.

"There, there, Onii-san, take mine. I saved this for you anyway," said Pesti as he gently offloaded his three untouched patties to my poor plate.

"You're the best Pesti!" I hugged him, letting go when I felt his body tense.

"Fine, take meh morsels. Better give meh bloody thanks." War grumbled as he offloaded his remaining two patties to my plate.

My heart swayed with forgiveness. I planted a 'thank you kiss,' on his cheek.

"Spoiling our younger brother again War?" chuckled Death, who was seated next to him.

War ignored his tease. He shuffled out of his seat to take his leave, failing to hide his blushes.

I warmly acknowledged our eldest brother.

Death was already of legal majority age, being three years older than myself.

Adams-san had once mentioned that women would find Death's stylish sweep of blond hair, symmetrical features and smiling blue eyes fetching. 'Of husband quality', he had put it.

I personally found it difficult to envision. Death would only need to open is mouth and talk about magism to turn a person off.

"With my blessings." He kindly offloaded his fat ganmodoki patties to me.

Buddha had blessed me with three kind brothers.

"Make sure you chew thirty times before swallowing," he said as he wiped off some rice grains from my face.

He removed himself from the bench with dirty plates in hand.

I wolfed down my food, cleaned my mess and raced out of the Kuri to complete the rest of my chores.

"Yummy!" I licked my lips and patted my satisfied belly as I strolled past the Karesansui, (the sand bed garden).

I stepped onto the soft sand and pebble stone path behind the Butsudan Hall, with intentions to make my way back to the alder log cabins.

The blissful rays of the afternoon sun continued to warm the air. Summer crickets still chirped their lulling tunes.

I hummed a ditty melody, then stopped. I feared it was from one of Bulldog's ragtime records, I had secretly listened to whilst sampling forbidden moonshine with my brothers at the Kuri basement. The times we had almost been caught by the *fukuten* or *tenzo* were bad for my heart.

"Forgive me Buddha for being a bad boy. I promise to be good from now on." I clapped my hands to set the promise.

The rush of feet at my back made me turn around; I cursed when my body was slammed to the ground by War's knock down.

"Yah sloppy Baby Bro, taught yah better than this," he said with an irritating grin.

"Ugh!" I struggled against War's headlock.

My banging hands stirred clouds of sand. I grabbed a fist full and threw it back at his head, causing his arms around me to ease.

I struggled out of his hold and stood, heaving for breath. He had

knocked the wind out of me.

"What the heck, War!"

"Dat's the spirit Baby Bro! Get 'em fighting juices flowing." He licked his lips as he grabbed my ankles and yanked me to the ground.

We brawled on the path, disturbing the air with more sand clouds.

"WAR! FAMINE! Cease this behavior this instant!"

We froze at the sound of Death's priggish voice from the Butsudan Hall's wide veranda.

"You're an idiot," I hissed at War and pushed him off me.

"Stupid pansy needs toughin' up." War threw back.

I moped at the messy sight of my sackcloth tunic and pants, and felt bits of stone stuck to my sandals. I pulled them off to pick out the troublesome pieces from the soles.

"War! Refrain from fighting our younger brother!" Death wagged an angry finger.

"Tell him Death." I poked my tongue at War.

"Grow up Famine! You're not a kid anymore!" Death redirected his scolding to me.

"B-But it was War who—" My explanation was silenced by Death's icy stare.

"Honestly, this behavior is disrespectful to Buddha and the monks. You should learn from our youngest! Furthermore, —" Death continued to scold.

War and I sat on our knees with our heads bowed with apology.

"If we were magis at a time of contention, you'd be flogged for disrespect according to Section 28 of the Magism Code of Conduct and Consequence, which states..." Death's scolding became a long-winded lecture.

I hoped he didn't notice my sleepy eyes.

"Ahem. I hate to interrupt your lecture Death-niisan, but Bulldog is asking for Onii-san."

I perked up to the sweet sound of Pesti's voice.

"Oh, Pestilence, of course." Death's voice had changed to a friendlier tone.

No surprises on who was his favorite brother.

"I think I've scolded these two children enough." He expelled a weary breath.

War and I rose to our feet, shoving each other back and forth in the process.

"Your fault Death's mad at us," I hissed at War.

"Yah a pipsqueak brother boy ain't yah," he answered back.

We snarled at each other.

"Come on Onii-san." Pesti sighed.

He grabbed me by the ear to drag me away from War's call for a rematch, and Death's groaning.

"You really ought to calm yourself when War tests you," Pesti said, releasing my ear once we were clear of the Butsudan Hall, and near the Temizuya stone basin.

We walked across the Central Courtyard and past the reinforced iron doors of the archive moonstone pillar tower, bowing our respects to passing monks.

"I can't help it. Big Bro's always picking on me," I sulked whilst rubbing my sore ear.

"You're an easy target Onii-san. You're simple-minded, you let your emotions get the better of you, you're too transparent." Pesti's observation tugged at my heart.

"Brutal!" I gasped at the truth.

"Mushin, Zanshin, Satori; it's what we learn, right?" He patted my back with a warm smile.

He was the wiser brother. Although he was a year younger, his maturity placed him on the same level as Death. If he were to shave his head and don the official midnight blue samue, he would likely reach the ideal image befitting Buddha's blessings.

I frowned with another train of thought.

"Hey, Pesti. Why did Shuso let us keep our hair, and we don't wear the blue samue?"

"You're asking me?" Pesti raised his brows at my random question.

"Dat because yah boys be wildcats, not ready for the samue!" Bulldog's gruff voice growled behind our backs. "Yah taken too long."

"Sorry Bulldog. It was War's fault. He started picking a fight with me for no reason," I mumbled my excuses and yelped at the stinging pinch Bulldog gave my ear.

He let out a weary sigh.

"Yah boys be old enough to be adults. Famine give meh most heart

trouble. Lots to learn, yah 'ave. Lucky, I know lots to teach." He flashed me a toothless smile, which didn't match the stern glare from his brown eyes.

"Pestilence. Go tend dah foxes. I be taken Famine for some training." Bulldog calmly ordered.

"Do well Onii-san." Pesti gave me the thumbs up.

He left for the evergreen trees at the bottom of the slope.

Bulldog was an unexpected monk in the blue kimono, and a kind-hearted father to the four of us at most times. Right now, his intimidating presence made me nervous.

"Now I teach yah some ways to Mushin." A cold grin pushed back his saggy cheeks.

I followed his lead to the pond amongst the evergreen trees, where my warm afternoon would soon become an icy cold one.

Bulldog had me learning Mushin in the pond's freezing water for most of the afternoon.

The evergreen trees grew a dense canopy around the irregular shaped pond I trained in, isolating it from the glaring late summer–early autumn sun. I shivered before I went into the water; no chance of feeling warm. To top it off, an overpowering stench of musk and pine wafted about the air to stir up a nasty headache as I practiced the art of stillness, waist-deep in murky water.

Eventually, I was permitted to re-join Pesti for our usual duties.

"Did you learn anything?" Pesti asked as he observed my shivering body.

"The pond's bloody cold. That's what I learned," I grumbled, feeling like a drowned rat.

Pesti chuckled. He returned to his work.

I sighed, deciding it was best to work harder, so I could dry faster.

We followed Bulldog's example of diligent care towards the plants and small animals of the grounds.

Seeing seeds, sown in the gardens by my own hands, flourish into a beautiful life was fulfilling. Healthy animals sharing napping spots as if they were old friends was a delightful sight.

Pesti enjoyed the company of animals the most. His ability to gain their assistance had lightened our work load.

The day was approaching twilight when we headed to the temple's

entrance to complete our last duties.

We were causally passing through the Torii gate near the shady pine forest when I felt something land on my shoulder. I dropped my water bucket with fright near one of the red hashira.

"Sheesh, Small Cap, quit startling me like that." I sighed with relief.

It was just my spider friend. His bug-face appeared to be grinning.

Small Cap was a large-sized great huntsman whose golden hair, walrus beard, opaque eyes and twiggy legs were a gentle appearance for a spider. I gave him his name because of his unique tiny tuft of hair that protruded from his forehead like a cap.

He scurried into my pocket.

"I'm glad he's fond of you. Probably been hard for him since he lost his place in his nest," Pesti said with a smile.

"Guess I'm his makeshift nestmate." I gently patted Small Cap's head.

"Or nest." Pesti pointed to my breast pocket.

If that was so, I was glad to be his home. Small Cap had been separated from his nest during a storm. A window had closed on his leg when he had tried to escape through the opening. His recovery had taken some time. So, when he returned to his nest, his scent was no longer recognizable to his family. He had been chased out.

I worked with Small Cap sleeping in my pocket. He woke when I had arrived to the Kuri for dinner time. Unaware of his surroundings, he jumped out of my pocket and landed on to War's loaded plate.

The comical sight of War's squeals and failed attempts to shoo off Small Cap was a priceless revenge.

Food was scattered everywhere about our table. Small Cap was able to escape through a partially opened window.

Death groaned when we saw the dining hall's attention was focused on us.

"Yah bloody wildcats! Clean up dah mess!" We copped a fierce scolding from Bulldog and a lot of disappointed sighs from the monks at the other tables.

My three brothers and I quietly cleaned up the damage. I felt War's irk burning at my back the whole time.

"Whydahell yah bring dat critter here, yah bastard?!" he discreetly growled into my ear.

I cringed at the elbow jab I felt to my gut.

"You're lucky Small Cap didn't bite your fat nose. I would've." I spat out.

Eventually the hall resumed its restful silence. The four of us focused on eating what little food was left on our plates.

War and Death had resumed their duties back at the library and archive towers after dinner. Small Cap didn't return.

Pesti and I finished planting the new seedlings in the small meditation garden behind the glowing white Butsudan Hall.

"Phew!" I heaved a sigh of satisfaction. Another day's work was done.

We walked along a moist stone path through the evergreen trees towards the stone wall.

I relished the smells of musky foliage and autumn flowers sailing under our noses. A calming breeze cooled our skin.

"Beautiful night," I whispered my thought aloud.

Pesti nodded.

We both stopped in our tracks, wonderstruck by the magical effulgence of the green, pink and blue aurora borealis snaking about the starry evening sky.

"Is this a spiritual nexus thing that Death goes on about?" I blurted the question to Pesti.

He answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

I smiled at his calm expression illuminated by the light, and gripped his hand tight within mine, feeling his warmth feed love into my heart.

It was a moment I didn't want to end.

A young rabbit brushed against my ankle.

Pesti pulled a carrot from his pocket; he fed it to the grateful rabbit. Its twitchy nose rubbed his ankle before it hopped down the slope.

"Hey, Pesti. This life won't change, right? You, me, Death, War will always be family, right?"

"Of course, I don't see what could change. Why would it?"

I felt settled by Pesti's answer.

"Thank you, brother," I whispered.

We reluctantly pulled away from the moment and made our way back to our room to call it a day.

I lapsed into a deep sleep as soon as I was comfortable in my futon.

Vague gurgling, coughing and other cries of bodily pain interrupted my sleep. I woke to pitch black night.

The noises became more obvious with dull thuds, angry curses, trampling boots, screaming, chanted curses and mechanical screeching.

Panic stirred my mind into action.

I groped the futon next to me for Pesti and felt my heart about to jump out of my chest when I couldn't feel him.

"Pesti," I whispered and yelped when a hand covered my mouth.

"Quiet Onii-san." Pesti's whispered voice flowed into my ears.

I kissed a sigh of relief into his hand.

He released my mouth and gripped my arm for me to follow his lead.

We gathered our tunics and dressed as we crawled our way to the far corner of our room.

A memory of a lecture with Bulldog surfaced to my mind.

"Boys, if yah ever find yahselves in danger, make sure yah go down a hatch."

Were we in danger? The increasing din of terrifying noises left no reason to doubt.

Pesti carefully pried open the hatch (disguised as a prayer mat), so as not to make a sound.

I followed him through the hatch, making sure the lid was carefully closed back into place, and down a secret hole.

The hole opened into a narrow tunnel that we had to crawl through.

A few times we had to block each other's noses from sneezes spurned on by the showers of dust that rained on our heads every time the floor above trembled.

We crawled to a three-way fork that had paths going off into unfamiliar areas.

"Which one do we go down?" I whispered to Pesti.

"Crap. I d-dunno," Pesti whispered.

Dirt and dust rained down harder on us from the commotion happening on the floor above. The eerie screams and unworldly screeches increased in volume.

"Ugh!" Pesti cursed before slamming a hand over his mouth.

I saw his body trembling with fright at the hairy spider dangling off the edge of his fringe.

"Small Cap." I extended my hand, relieved to see my eight-legged friend.

He jumped off Pesti's hair and landed on the back of my hand.

I lowered my nose close to his body.

"Hey, you know the way out?" I whispered as quietly as I could.

Small Cap rubbed his forelegs together before he turned and scurried down the left path.

"Let's go." I prompted Pesti.

We followed Small Cap away from the din.

The tunnel eventually gave way to a dead end and closed hatch surrounded by scrawny tree roots.

I felt my knees scrapped and damp from moss and wet soil. Scents of morning dew and fresh foliage wafted up my nose.

We paused for danger. When we felt the coast was clear, we pulled aside the tree roots and pushed open the hatch with all our might.

My heart ached at the sight of demon orange and red lights dancing about my eyes. The monastery was engulfed in an uncontrollable fire.

I coughed at the taste of burnt material and smoke quickly contaminating the air. The sounds of people and creatures suffering pain were deafening to my ears.

"Death, War!" I cried out and scrambled into a blind run for the temple gardens and path back to Sangha Hall.

My way was cut off by Bulldog and some of the monks sprinting in our direction.

"No! Go back! Too late!" Bulldog yelled out as he grabbed my arm and forced my sprints back to the secret hole and the wall nearby.

"Small Cap!" I called when I saw him perched on the hatch.

He skilfully leapt onto my shoulder and scurried into my pocket.

I stumbled to a rest next to Pesti with my chest heaving for breath.

"Please, Bulldog, we need to get Death and War." I panted, receiving a head shake for an answer.

"What's the meaning of this?!" I screamed hysterically.

I was slapped back to my senses by Pesti's hand.

"Onii-san. We've to find a way out first before we can go back," Pesti coolly reasoned.

Of course, what he said seemed the most logical approach, but my uneasiness wouldn't calm.

"I'm anxious to see they're safe, too, so let's trust in Bulldog and the monks." He gently added.

I glanced at Small Cap's tiny head poking out from my pocket. His earnest stare, from all of his eight eyes, seemed to be saying the same thing.

Bulldog and the monks chanted in a low hum. Their arms drew an intricate symbol of a third eye *cakra* into the air before us.

The symbol glowed with a brilliant blue light. It became solid as the monks' chanting increased in volume. It smashed against the moonstone wall's surface like glass.

My eyes bulged at a sight of a frozen, white, world beyond the opening the *cakra* symbol had created in the wall.

"GO!" One of the monks shouted.

I was pushed through the opening along with Pesti.

The sounds of fire, destruction and calamity were replaced with howling winds as we sprinted through snow that whipped at our skin and stung our eyes, barely keeping track of the orange from the monks' billowing *kesa*.

The snowy landscape wasn't showing changes in scenery. My legs were about to collapse.

We stopped suddenly. The monks threw a strip of brown, talisman, rice paper into the air.

I gawked at the sight of aurora lights dancing about the white snow.

We were ushered into the lights and found ourselves entering the comfy warmth of a hunter's log cabin.

Bulldog guided us to a calming fire at the cabin's hearth with orders of resting on the rug.

"Bulldog. Death and War—" My voice trailed off with doubts of their escape burning on the tip of my tongue.

No. They were our strong and smart older brothers. I had to believe it was their fate to survive and be with us soon.

Pesti's mouth opened to say something, then closed without uttering anything.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight.

Our eyes drooped with sleep as our bodies thawed under the

hearth's warmth.

I was on the edge of a deep sleep when I felt Pesti's body tense; my eyes opened to his expression of terror towards the cabin's window.

I turned my head to see what he was looking at, but he yanked my head back, so our eyes were on each other.

"What is it?" My voice trembled.

Pesti answered with a tighter embrace.

"Famine," he whispered my name.

High-pitched shrieking smashed through the cabin's window and brought an onslaught of snowy winds and near-blinding blue flashes inside.

The hearth's warmth was snuffed out.

I screamed and struggled against the invading monstrous tree like men in black suits that were yanking Pesti and myself apart with abnormal hands and branch-like fingers.

"Pesti! No, get off me!" I screamed for him, desperate to keep hold of his hand.

"PESTI!"

High-pitched shrieking attacked my ears. The stench of fresh blood wafted up my nose. I felt the brunt of a dull object knock me unconscious.

Evadale Knight Order

I experienced an uncanny dream that felt vividly real. In the dream, I was staring at part of my face from Small Cap's eyes, but with a third-person voice perspective. Almost like I was reading pages from a novel.

One of Small Cap's spindly legs checked the soft flesh of the two-legged creature sprawled, lifeless, on the wet ground they had been dumped on by a scary tree-two-legs in black.

He didn't like two-leg creatures, preferring to stay clear from them. However, this two-leg had spent time nursing him back to health from an injury with all his favorite foods. He treated him nicely. This two-legs was Freend.

"Is Freend okay?" He rubbed his forelegs worryingly.

"Wake up." The tip of his leg pushed as hard as it could against Freend's cheek.

He couldn't see his face clearly, but felt his thin fur was warm.

"Alive, good."

He looked around the place they were in, trying his hardest to take stock of their location. Shining blue floors and walls shimming with weird patterns of rainbow light were the only aspects he could see. They gave him a not-real feeling.

A low drone, vibrations and a sensation of shifting stone made the hair on his back prick up with fear.

"Place not good for Freend and me." Small Cap had concluded. "Must get out. Get safe."

He jumped off Freend's face to hunt for an exit.

"Small Cap!" The spider's name came out of my mouth upon waking. I opened my eyes and paused for breath. I saw the same blue floors Small Cap had seen in my dream. I sat up and saw that I was surrounded by the same weird walls.

"Not a dream." I had concluded.

Yet if I had been looking through Small Cap's eyes, why the third-person perspective?

Was it an observation from another person, and I happened to tap into their mind?

What was this place? Where was Small Cap? More importantly, where was Pesti?

My body tingled from the floor's vibrations. I blinked back intense light from the shimmering walls.

A belly grumble roared throughout the room; followed by an overpowering din of chattering voices.

"Bring down thy curtain of eternal night!" Boomed, a voice with deep baritones.

"Save us!" Pleaded the voices of children.

Many voices chanted and reverberated continuously around the poor boy's ears, who struggled to keep a hold of his senses and sanity.

As a freshly dipped ink pen was pressed to a blank page of an open book, a revelation was being made. Famine encountered the Narrator in all his splendor and majestic glory.

"What the hell?" His exasperation heated the back of his hand, which covered his mouth.

The boy gazed on, in awe.

"Stop it! As if!" I cursed at the creature parading before me.

It was fashioned in a black and red costume of a court jester, with silver bells dangling off its fool's hat. There was definitely nothing funny about the pair of bulging blue eyes set within a painted white face and its red mouth stretched wide, so the corners almost touched the ends of its floppy ears. A blue book hovered before it.

Alas, the Narrator could not savor a fine meal this time. Already the stomping boots were on his doorstep, the calamitous voices and rapid piercing noises were focused on breaking down his door.

"This is where I say goodnight, Famine," he said.

The court jester opened his book to call upon a third eye cakra symbol. He disappeared through the black hole the symbol had made. The

hole vanished.

"Ugh!" I screamed as the room quaked with a serious threat of caving in on me.

Streams of natural light broke through falling debris. Silhouettes of rushing men entered the room.

Something went *woosh* past my ears.

I felt stinging pain to the side of my neck to render me unconscious, again.

∞

"Are you still sleeping?" A kind voice echoed about my ears.

I blinked in an elegant image of rice paper walls intricately painted with red and white cherry blossom flowers.

"Ugh." I involuntarily let out; the walls swam around me as I sat up.

"Hey, easy. Rest a little to give your body time to readjust," said the kind voice again.

Firm hands assisted me into a sitting position. I saw I had been lying on a futon in a small room lined with tatami mats.

A subdued light was cast around the walls like a paper lantern. An intricately designed night table of bronze material was the only other piece of furniture in the room.

"Very lucky my masters had discovered you when they did. That juxtapositioner's lair was trapping human prey."

"Huh? Ju-ta what lair?" I mumbled, still feeling out of it.

"Or could it be that it wasn't satisfied with its trappings?" The voice mused.

"Um, where am I?" I gasped when I saw a man with a mouse's head kneeling before me.

I say man, but that wasn't quite right. His skin shone with a metallic bronze tone, not a strand of fur was in sight. One eye was covered with what appeared to be a leather monocle patch. The other eye was an iron cog with a diamond in the center. He wore a no collar, full body uniform of lucky red and dragon gold cloth.

The corner of my eye caught a swift shadow that went flying for the mouse-man's monocle eye.

"Ugh! What is this demon?!" The mouse-man cried out, his arms

flailing randomly about the air to throw off the eight-legged insect.

"You hurt Freend. Me protect Freend." An innocent and deep voice spoke in my mind. It felt familiar and reassuring.

"Small Cap!" I called out to the great huntsman.

"It's okay, Small Cap. I think he doesn't mean any harm." I beckoned for him to come to me.

"Yes, yes, as the boy says, I mean you both no harm." The mouse-man threw up his hands with a surrender.

Small Cap eased himself off the eye and scurried up to my shoulder.

"I'm so glad to see you." I gently patted the top of his head with the tip of my finger.

"Wait! Did you say that you were going to protect Freend?" I looked to Small Cap.

"Freend me protect." The deep voice confirmed in my mind.

"Woah! Is this for real?" I almost fell backwards. "You spoke Small Cap?"

"Aah, of course, being trapped within the juxtapositioner's lair has drawn out your ability to communicate through shared telepathy. A rather common side effect of that demon's power," informed the mouse-man.

"Wait one minute! Lemme get this straight." I sat upright. "You're saying Small Cap and I were trapped in a demon's lair that gave us the power to talk to each other?"

"Quite." The mouse-man's bronze lips lifted with a smile. Fine silver whiskers twitched animatedly.

"I am Forneas. An animachine built to care for the human race. Pleased to make your acquaintance." He introduced himself with a cordial bow.

"Okay," I responded, still unsure of everything.

Nevertheless, I decided to trust his word on meaning no harm. He was kind and I was alive. Yet where the hell was I? The place felt foreign and bizarre.

My thoughts scrambled back to the last memories of my brothers. They lingered on Pesti's crying face.

"Pesti! My brothers! Please tell me you know where they are?!" I erratically begged Forneas.

"Ouch!" I winced, calmed down by the stinging slap to my cheek.

"Sorry young human. I detected elevated hysteria from your biorhythms. My data recommended the slap treatment to the cheek," Forneas explained with an inappropriately cheerful voice.

"You really aren't human." I deduced of his make-up.

"Of course." Forneas seemed proud of the fact.

"Why a mouse head?"

"All humans like cute creatures, do they not?" he replied matter-of-factually.

I could hardly argue with that askew logic, so shrugged off the answer and returned my focus to the important fact that I was in a strange room with a mouse-man-machine identified as Forneas.

The persistent mental imagery of my home being burnt down made my stomach churn and head droop with sorrow.

My home being ransacked and destroyed felt like a nightmare. I didn't want it to be real. Every time I denied the images as fact, my heart throbbed painfully against my chest.

"It can't be." Tears poured down my cheeks as I remembered the last time I had seen Bulldog alive.

"My family." My voice trembled through my tears.

"We together Freend." Small Cap's voice was considerate but also sad.

"WHY?!" I sobbed pitifully, punching my outrage into the tatami mats to make my knuckles bleed.

"Grieve as much as you want, boy and small creature." Forneas tenderly stroked my heaving back.

I released all my emotions until I had exhausted myself.

Forneas carefully bandaged my bloody hands and cleaned the mess I had made on the mats.

Not sure how much time had lapsed when I heard the door open and a real man had entered the room.

My eyes feasted on the splendor of a military officer sporting a stiff navy-blue peaked cap (with a band of gold laurel running along the short brim and a gold star for a centerpiece) and dandy double-breasted jacket of the same color, which had shiny gold buttons and polished silver clasps running down the middle of his torso.

His long legs were neatly presented in crisp navy-blue slacks tucked firmly into polished calf-length black boots.

White-gloved hands rested close to the sheathed longsword dangling against his hip.

I found myself swooning from the sweet aroma of vanilla and citrus coming off his body. His tight, striking image of austerity was highly alluring.

His stern gray eyes were fixed on Small Cap perched to my shoulder.

"That is a spider." His deep voice kept a level tone.

"Quite, Master Leinard." Forneas chipped in.

"It's alive."

I thought I heard a slight tremor behind the man's voice.

Forneas adjusted the cog ring around his diamond eye, which activated a small stream of blue light. Small Cap stumbled backwards with fright when the light ran up and down his body. Forneas turned it off by readjusting the cog ring again.

"According to data retrieved from the scans. It's a rare *Delena Cancerides* of the *Sparassidae* species commonly referred to as the Great Huntsman. This one is of the male kind. The species was last seen in the Tempra desert regions, thought to be extinct due to climate changes, mass exterminations and bird preying over many years," Forneas explained, matter-of-factually.

"That extinct species is perched on this boy's shoulder," the man commented.

His tone of voice hadn't changed, but the gulping movements of his Adam's apple gave me an impression that the sight of Small Cap made him uncomfortable.

Detecting the man's discomfort, Small Cap scurried into my pocket as fast as a blink of an eye.

"As you can see, Master Leinard, it is a fast creature. Add to the fact that it is also a stealthy night predator. The Wu King Martial Arts are known to have incorporated this creature's attack strategies." Forneas continued, oblivious to his master's disinterest in the matter.

"Forneas. Why're they here?" Leinard was straight to the point.

"Oh, we have yet to establish this conversation. He was rescued from that juxtapositioner demon, Master Trix's men, had been tracking in the South Wing."

Forneas's answer caused the man to pause for words.

"South Wing, you say." His face lapsed into a pensive expression as

he mulled over the fact further.

He eventually resumed the conversation.

"Boy, your name," Leinard calmly ordered.

"My name is Famine, sir," I answered.

I decided to tell him the truth. I figured there was no point in holding back on information that may help me learn of my brothers' whereabouts.

I explained how I was knocked unconscious by some tree-men in black suits and woke up in a shiny blue room with a court jester.

"Forneas tells me the court jester was a demon. I've still no idea where I am. I want to know where my brothers are."

"How many more of you?" Leinard frowned.

"Um, three. We were separated when my home was on fire. It's hard to explain. I can only say that for some reason I found myself running for my life, knocked out cold and waking up here."

"And home is where?" Leinard's eyes narrowed with caution.

"Gat Shiem," I cordially answered, holding back the tears that threatened to resurface as my thoughts went to my brothers' faces.

"Please, my brothers, if I described them to you could tell me if you've seen them?" I asked the man.

Leinard paused for thought before prompting me to carry on.

I described my brothers' appearances with as much detail and waited for the man's response.

A heavy silence hung about the air before he spoke with another question.

"You say Gat Shiem was on fire? Who set it alight?" His frown deepened.

"I don't know. It happened so fast," I bravely answered.

The gathering tears were stinging my eyes as I remembered more of that fateful night.

Sensing my rising emotions, the man changed the subject by formally introducing himself.

"I am Lieutenant Colonel Leinard Aueralius of the Evadale Knight Order. Did Forneas explain of your whereabouts?"

I shook my head.

Forneas was prompted to explain the geography of where I was positioned.

Leinard's men had discovered us during their patrols of a place referred to as Hell's Labyrinth due to its many red-brick and obsidian stone wall barriers, which formed interlinking corridors of cell pockets and lairs.

The cells and lairs contained wayward demons and the ill-favored humankind.

Forneas expanded his explanation.

I learned that I was in a city called Apocalypse and a part of the city called the Second District, which was populated predominately with various army, mercenary and town security factions.

"The city—in its entirety—is an expansive fortress for approximately fifty thousand people spread out across the four-layered districts that make it up."

He rambled on about how the city was purposely populated by invitation from an underworld organization called the Illuminate Group. It wasn't possible to leave the city without the permission from this group.

I frowned, wondering if this group had carried me into the city.

"So, it's likely that someone in this, er, Illuminate Group, brought me here."

"If so, this is a problem." Leinard interrupted.

"Why?" I blurted.

Leinard's eyes narrowed. He whispered something into Forneas's ears before turning to take his leave.

"Forneas will be in your care, Famine of Gat Shiem. He will cater for any of your baser necessities."

"By your command, Master Leinard." Forneas acknowledged his master's orders with a formal bow.

Leinard left the room.

"Forneas, that man and this place," I asked, hoping to gather more information.

"As per previous explanations, Master Leinard is our lieutenant colonel of the Evadale Knight Order who is tasked with the security detail and duties of Hell's Labyrinth, Apocalypse's maximum-security prison for demons and human prisoners," Forneas explained.

"What is Apocalypse's purpose?" I frowned.

Forneas took his time to arrive to an answer.

"Originally a mining city. It has become the seat of power for The Illuminate Group, working in lieu of the Armia Dukedom. A lot of wealthy patrons and curious magis have accepted an invitation with promise of acquiring the zirconia stone once mined here."

I pressed my hand to my chest to contain the twang of pain I felt in my heart. The place I found myself in was a far cry from the monastery home I loved.

"I am sure all this information and experiences have tired you." Forneas changed the subject.

A tantalizing scent of what seemed like cinnamon wafted up my nose. I suddenly felt fatigued.

"No, I'm... fi..." I slurred with droopy eyes. "What have...?"

My voice trailed off as my eyes fluttered to a close. I drifted into a deep sleep.

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Remaining in a state of grief wasn't going to help me find my brothers. I convinced myself of this mindset.

"Why yah fear?" Bulldog had once asked me during one of our Zen training sessions.

Back then I had no answer. Now I understood what he was trying to teach me. Fear pushed my determination to find my brothers. Hope gave me a belief that they were unharmed. These feelings balanced each other with a purpose. Right now, it was prudent, learning as much of the place I had been thrown into. So far, luck was on my side.

I noticed there was an inner wall partition near the night table, which masked the view of the attached bathing alcove. The alcove had enough space to fit a one-man square shaped tub and a strange U-shaped seat with a funnel hole. I learned that the seat was called a Washlet Basin.

"According to Master Trix's definition, 'it's a throne to relieve one's load.' I believe the proper term is human excretion device." Forneas had crudely answered my question in regard to it.

When the basin's iron side handle was cranked and released, spurts of water sprayed upwards to clean out the embarrassing body region. Crank the handle a second time, spurts of warm air and a lemon scent was released to dry down the area.

All good and well, but Forneas failed to mention what happened

when the handle was cranked too much and released too fast.

"Forneeaas!" I screamed when a geyser of hot air threw me through the rice paper wall partition.

I landed on the other side of the room with my naked butt in the air and face squashed to the ground. A compromising position no decent human being should ever experience.

"Oh, yes, that tends to happen from time to time." Forneas had nonchalantly excused the incident.

"Ha!" I grumpily exhaled, blowing off annoying strands of fringe that had strayed into my eyes.

I stumbled to my feet and reclaimed my decency, feeling relieved that the only ones to witness my contorted body pose were a machine and a spider.

Either way, I was able to perform my ablution and say my prayers despite the conditions and my mixed feelings of anal violation.

Forneas never left the room. I didn't receive other visitors after Leinard's pop in. I figured that the care I received was subject to my level of threat.

I accepted the perks offered whilst I mulled over an escape plan and means to search for my brothers. The animachine brought in meals according to my preferences. Small Cap was given free rein of the room. Forneas offered him bugs and invertebrate suited his taste. Our happy bellies made it difficult to find the motivation to leave.

It was during one of my meal sittings that an odd bird of a man had dropped into the room from the ceiling and messed up my dinner.

"Gaah!" I cursed bitterly when my choice pieces of spring onion dumplings went flying all over the place and sauces were splayed across the ground.

I saw a pulchritude face of a man I haphazardly guessed to be around Death's age.

A bronze monocle patch was strapped over his natural right eye. As I peered closer, I noticed the lens refracted colors as a kaleidoscope would when moved about.

I yelped when his natural left eye flicked open, his blue eyeball moved up and down as if it was performing a scan on my face like Forneas's eye had done on Small Cap.

"Woah, a pretty angel!" The man piped up.

His large white-gloved hands cupped the sides of my head and forced my lips onto his.

I struggled in vain to free myself from our lip-lock, feeling weakened from the warmth and forcefulness his lips pressed to mine. I panicked when the tip of his tongue probed for an entry point into my mouth.

My eyes caught sight of the small body that had landed on his head.

I was released when the man's arms flailed about the air, struggling against Small Cap's eight-legged assault that messed up tufts of his short brown hair.

I shuffled to a safer position behind Forneas, vigorously wiped at my mouth and threw every bit of remaining drink down my throat to cleanse away germs that man would have given me.

When I had sanitized enough, I saw that Small Cap had been shaken off to the ground and stretched out with exhaustion.

The man was also panting for breath against the busted partition.

"So that's the spider Leinard was muttering about," he chuckled when he had recovered his breath. "Pretty brutal attack for a small pest."

I frowned.

He pushed himself up off the floor and stood before me, picking off bits of my meal from his dark patchwork overcoat unfastened to reveal his white cotton shirt beneath a buttoned-up navy blue vest and matching blue tie with a gold star symbol at its center.

I saw the largeness of his hands when they dusted off the remaining food debris from his navy-blue pants tucked into calf-length black boots. His long legs carried shape and promise of sinew strength.

"Sturdy like a racehorse," I blurted and blushed when I had realized what came out of my mouth.

He picked up the coils of rope and a belt of finger size tube metal shells from the floor, removed his overcoat and began fitting them over his chest, so they were crisscrossed against his vest.

My eyes wandered over the outline of his body, which hinted at athleticism. They loitered around the tanned purpose belt—with attached pouch—to his waist and the strangely shaped holster strapped around his right thigh.

"You can keep checking me out. I don't mind." He smirked, standing

tall, so I saw him in full glory.

"I would never!" I averted his gaze.

Forneas surprised me when he welcomed the intruder warmly by name.

"Oh, Master Trix. I was expecting you to drop in later. I would have laid another plate." He skillfully cleared away the mess on the square meal mat that was in lieu of a table.

"Drop in? More like crashed in. Just look at the hole in the ceiling." I pointed upwards to draw everyone's attention to the gaping hole above us.

"If you were intending to hold me prisoner, you need to rethink your cell design," I complained and received laughter from the man Forneas had called Trix.

"An angel with an attitude," Trix commented.

He fiddled with his monocle until he was satisfied it was on properly.

"Call me Trix, Ohime-sama. I'm at your disposal." He surprised me with a genuflection and tender kiss to the back of my hand.

I responded with a reflective backhanded slap to his face. It wasn't enough to shake off the creeps I felt running up my arm.

"Gaah! You're one of those perverts Death warned me of, aren't you?"

"Master Trix is the Map of Hell's Labyrinth. It would be impossible for our knights to find their way around the place without him," Forneas answered.

"Map?" I frowned, perplexed on how this perverted man before me could be a map.

Trix faced me with a sober expression. I noticed his uncanny likeness to the man called Leinard for the first time.

"Down to brass tacks. Forneas." He clicked his fingers to stir Forneas into action.

The animachine rummaged around the insides of the night table drawer and returned with a big box that he placed before me. He opened the box to reveal clothes. I gawked at the pile.

"Dumping your laundry on me?" I looked to Trix.

"Call it a welcome gift," Trix declared. "Who knows how long that tunic you're wearing will last before it drops off. Although I wouldn't

find it a displeasure, to see you running around in your birthday suit."

I cringed at his tacky words and gingerly touched the cloth.

The white butterfly collar blouse felt smooth and fluid. The gentleman's navy-blue vest was unexpectedly light, even with the middle row of pure brass buttons joining the flaps together.

I unboxed a pair of crease-free tanned cotton pants, suspenders, a dark double-belt pouch, gray flat cap and open finger gloves.

The red bow tie next to the cap had intrigued me the most. I had only seen great scholars wear these in Bulldog's newspaper books.

"I'm sure I'll be smarter if I wore this," I blurted with glee, holding out the bow tie before me.

"Unlikely," Forneas flatly answered.

"Mean!" I pouted, figuring out on how I should dress in the outfit.

"How long you're going to sit there?" Trix suggestively smirked. "Hurry up and undress."

An unpleasant vibe ran down my spine.

Small Cap scrambled up my arm to stand guard on my shoulder.

"Not worry Freend. I bite big two-leg's face if he causes trouble." He reassured me.

I peered at Trix's face, wondering what he was thinking.

He was, as Death would describe such a man, handsome. His unseemly behavior was a major turn-off. Who the hell kisses a stranger upon first sight?

"You're not implying I undress before you?" I frowned.

"Embarrassed? No need to be, we're both men." His form of reassurance achieved the opposite result.

"I think not!" I nervously snapped.

My heart thumped wildly against my chest when Trix approached the box of clothes.

The potent scent of vanilla and citrus from his body made me feel off balanced.

He pulled out the shirt and laid it against my back. I was too petrified to move away.

Small Cap raised his legs and swiped at the pervert's face.

I yelped when his small body flew across the room from the backhand hit Trix had given in retaliation. He landed to the ground, unconscious.

"Small Cap! You bastard!" I spat at Trix.

It didn't faze him. He held my arms down and pulled me to his body.

"Now that the critter is dealt with, I'll help you undress." His hot breath heated the back of my ears.

My cheeks became flushed, heart swelled with discomfort when his breathing changed to light kisses running the nape of my neck.

"Please stop," I whimpered.

Obscured images flooded my mind. I felt a sickly tingling sensation where his fingers stroked and teased my bare skin. My will was slipping away.

"Touch me." The order plagued my reasoning.

I was unable to fight against the urge to feel his lips, the back of his teeth, his tongue snaking about the inside of my mouth and the taste of his saliva mixing with mine.

"Master Trix!" Forneas knocked Trix off me.

My senses had recovered, along with the will to move. I shuffled away from the man, who was shaking his head out of a daze.

"H-Hey! Whada Sol? B-Back off, you p-pervert!" I stammered my threat and shuffled to where Small Cap was.

My mind scrambled for an escape but failed. I couldn't think straight in this dangerous situation. The ground quaked beneath us, adding to my escalating discomfort.

Running boots and curt yelling approached the room.

Two boys about my age, wearing glasses and donning the same uniform as Trix—minus the ropes—stormed into view.

"Report," Trix ordered the intruders.

"We have a problem," stated the boy wearing thick framed glasses.

He stared at me for some time before speaking again. "Strange prisoner."

"Unexpected intruder, carry on." Trix corrected the boy.

The other boy pushed his round framed glasses up the flat bridge of his button nose.

"The skrit in the West Wing gone berserk. They're attacking any knight and prisoner they come across," he soberly reported.

I was surprised by the serious frown creasing Trix's forehead. His mannerisms to the other boys contrasted the treatment he gave me. Was his perverseness a way of testing character?

"How many knights are stationed?" he coolly asked.

"Four squads. Colonel had Colin's team come in from the field to help. I don't know how much longer they can hold out," said the round-glasses boy.

He noticed me for the first time.

"Captain, you don't think..." His voice trailed off.

Fierce tremors shook the walls.

A gust of icy wind chilled my face. A group of hairless and eyeless tree-men in black suits barged into the room.

It was them; the ones responsible for my misery. The rage I felt for revenge replaced every other emotion in my heart.

"Bastards!" I lurched for them with fists raised, ignoring the warnings from the other men.

A tree-man grabbed my arms, raised me to the air, then slammed me to the ground with brute force.

"Ugh!" I cried out from the jarring pain I felt to my back.

High pitch shrieking attacked my eardrums. It was silenced by a wave of blue light.

"Stay down!" The round-glasses boy shouted at me.

He pulled out an iron marble from his coat pocket and threw it at the tree-man.

I shuddered at the shrilling noise the ball made in the air before it pierced the tree-man's chest like tissue paper.

The demon burned with white light; its body was sucked inwards. A light shower of glitter replaced the creature.

"What?!" I gasped.

The room became an overwhelming din of shrills and high-pitched shrieks. My rage changed to fear as I was unable to move a muscle from the deafening noise jabbing at my eardrums.

"Eguzkiaren argia, sua deitzen dut!" Trix bellowed.

fireballs formed in the air to hit the tree-men. The ones before us shrieked and writhed with pain before transforming into free-falling ash or glitter.

Tree-men reinforcements entered and faced the same drastic fate. Where one skrit fell, another entered to take its place

The noise intensified, air crackled and became hot.

"Aargh!" I cursed as I struggled to free my ankle from the clutches

of a tree-man.

Swooping sounds blew across my ears. I was momentarily disoriented by a series of white flashes. My vision cleared to the sight of the tree-man's hands crumbling to ash.

I relished the short-lived relief to my ears.

A couple more knights entered the room to aid the fight.

"Get him out of here!" I heard Leinard shout out his order from behind them.

He skillfully hacked his way inside with a pair of daggers.

Small Cap was still unconscious near Leinard's boots. I scooped him up and into my pocket before he could be stomped on.

My countenance paled at the sight of three tiers of jagged teeth bared before me.

"Buddha, protect me," I panted.

The tree-man shrieked before it imploded into a glitter shower.

The atmosphere became unbearable; it was hard to breathe, see anything. I was too fatigued to move.

"Goddamn useless weakling," I mumbled, my self-loathing. My eyes drooped heavily.

Hands pulled me up. I groaned in Trix's arms as he carried me out of the lantern room.

A thumping pain to my temples forced my mind into unconscious.

War and the Demon

Hair black with a healthy gloss. Notable eye color, black. Skin pigmentation light but not pale.

Biological age approximately sixteen summers. Sodium and phosphate levels normal and consistent with Forneas's observed data of the food he consumed. Cholesterol and glucose levels within an acceptable range. No obvious allergies.

Light tests proved no sensitivity, negating the Night Vamprous genus...

A manly and aloof voice delivered a prognosis. Was I caught in another juxtapositioner's lair?

His words were clearly expressed; they didn't appear to be of a third-person narrative.

I realized I was conscious, but my eyes were closed, and I was lying incapacitated. The surface beneath me was solid and cool to the touch.

"Further blood tests detected an intriguing amount of elevated testosterone and epinephrine. On the other hand, his mana levels were too low for magical abilities." The clinical voice rambled on.

"Your conclusion." I recognized Leinard's voice.

The clinical voice sighed. "I envisioned the worst that would've befallen our Captain is sexual exhaustion. Apart from an overexcited libido triggered on a whim, the boy's readings concluded a perfectly healthy and normal human."

I heard a frustrated sigh released from Leinard before he raised a question on why demons called skrit were going to such lengths to capture me when I wasn't anything exceptional.

The skrits' attempts had seen to the injuries or deaths of eight of his squads so far, with the remaining able body knights fighting for their lives to hold back an onslaught occurring across the entire landscape of Hell's Labyrinth.

My heart picked up in beat when I learned of the high damage and

loss of life among the human prisoners. I gathered an impression that the statistics were not a normal pattern.

"If the boy is common, as you say, why smuggle him into Apocalypse and place him in Hell's Labyrinth without—" Leinard's voice paused.

His breath burned against my cheek. The sensation was replaced with a stinging slap.

"Argh!" I yelped.

"How long have you been listening?"

My eyes met Leinard's, which were filled with rage. I felt a lie to his question would put me into a coma.

"Since the start of your recipe list for a devilishly handsome guy." I spat out. "Your analysis was kind of off. I'm eighteen."

I gradually sat up and was introduced to the voice behind the clinical recipe list.

Dr Samuel Abe Mercer of the EKO Medical Unit was a wiry man in a white overcoat. His features were gaunt and close to being skeletal. A black eye-patch covered his right eye, but it couldn't hide the deep scaring around his brow bone and upper cheekbone. His free eye carried a bizarre tint of red that accentuated the morose tone of his pale skin and small ears.

"Oh, and he's aesthetically pleasing to the eye," Samuel added to his diagnosis.

I glanced around the room I was contained within.

Glass cabinets (storing rows of labelled vials) were lined up against one wall.

Opposite to where I sat stood tall benches supporting strange bronze and bulky apparatuses.

Freestanding lamps burned in the corners; their white light focused on the metal slab that I rested on.

The walls that I could make out were a sterile gray and unadorned.

From my memories of books, I had seen, I deduced I was in something of a medical examination room. I braced myself for further interrogation.

"I'm very excited to come across a living creature other than demons and humans." Samuel's eyes brightened and turned toward one of the benches.

I felt nervous by the sight of his glistening red eye and decided to see what had excited him. Blood rushed to my head and went cold against my chest when I saw Small Cap unconscious on a metal tray on the bench.

His legs were stretched out and clamped down by tiny pincers connected to the arm of an apparatus, and a set of small knives (I recognize as tools called scalpels) were laid out next to him.

"Whaddahell are you gonna do to him?!" I shouted angrily.

I stumbled towards Small Cap to free him from the pincers, and was able to free his legs, but my arms were forced backwards and held captive by Leinard when I went to scoop him up.

"Small Cap - wake up!" I shouted desperately to jostle the spider out of his unconscious state.

My heart picked up in beat when his legs twitched to life. I heard his voice groan inside my head.

"Free-nd? Wher..." His voice trailed off when he saw the terrifying form of a man looming over him.

"Amazing!" The mad doctor squealed with delight as he closely examined Small Cap's return to consciousness with a scalpel posed for cutting in his trembling hands.

"Ugh!" Small Cap shrieked with fright and took the mental order I gave him to run and hide.

His small body scrambled into action, running blindly across the bulky equipment to find a way off the bench. The mad doctor chased him around the bench; he was a surprisingly fast mover.

"To the left! The right!" I shouted out my assistance and attempted to bite off the hand that Leinard had cupped over my mouth to shut me up.

His other hand kept a firm grip around my arms to hold me back from going to Small Cap's aid.

I sighed with relief when Small Cap was able to leap off the bench and scurry into a tight crevice between the wall and a glass cabinet. He'd be safe for now.

"Boo." Samuel pouted, childishly, with disappointment.

He came at me with a threatening look in his eyes and the scalpel raised and ready to attack my face.

Bring it. I'll bite his nose off and smash his head with my own to

ensure Small Cap's safety.

He surprised me when his mood and attitude became clinical again.

He placed the scalpel back in the pile with the others, pulled out a stool that had been hiding under the bench, and took a seat. His eyes scanned my body before he spoke again.

"Interesting friendship."

"Doctor Mercer." Leinard prompted the man.

"Well." Samuel sighed as he stood up.

He grabbed a needle, which formed the head of a clear tube container holding a strange liquid.

I yelped when he stabbed me with the needle and pushed on the tube's base, so all the liquid drained out, and into my arm. Tears welled in my eyes from the instant pain I had felt.

The needle-tube thing was pulled out of my arm and tossed aside once it was emptied.

Samuel slapped a wet patch over the puncture wound the needle had created.

"Ouch!" I involuntarily let out.

"That completes quarantine. You'll be able to move him out of the infirmary ward," he advised.

Leinard dropped his hold on my arms and faced me with a choice.

"From this point on, you are to live by one of two choices."

I felt queasy at the thought of the two choices. It was obvious I would accept choice number one, since the other saw myself no different as a prisoner, and with little opportunity to find my brothers.

"Fine. I am Famine from Gat Shiem and my friend, whom your kind doctor was about to cut apart, is Small Cap. We place ourselves in your care." I reintroduced myself to Leinard with a formal bow.

It seemed to earn a smile from him. Albeit for a split-second.

Upon hearing his name, I saw Small Cap emerge from the crevice. He ran up my arm and into my pocket before the men had a chance to recapture him.

"You'll obey the instructions of my captain and his squad's sergeant." Leinard's voice assumed a serious and threatening tone to his next words.

"If you so much as attempt to escape or break order within the squad, I'll not hesitate to send the spider to our kind doctor for

dissection, and for you to helplessly watch as he cuts away his legs, piece by piece, alive."

I nodded with understanding and felt Small Cap's body shiver. It was clear he understood this as well.

I followed Leinard out of the examination room and into a white corridor that held signs of natural light from the high ceiling windows that beamed over our heads. An eerie quiet trailed our syncopated footsteps on the stone floor.

Leinard stopped to face me.

"Famine. Did you know, Gat Shiem's buildings were made from elemental resistant materials? Even the strongest elemental spell shouldn't make the moonstone spark." He frowned.

"No." I shook my head. "Contrary to what you say, I saw the demon fire. I wished I hadn't."

"Demon fire, hmm," he said as he thoughtfully rubbed at this chin.

We resumed our silent walk down the corridor, towards a set of double doors and a T-Junction.

I was stopped, again, at the start of the junction.

"Was there a man named Melchizedek there? He would've been an elderly man with a papery voice and a front gap tooth," Leinard asked.

"Melchizedek? Oh, you mean Shuso." I guessed who he would be referring to, considering Shuso was the only monk at that place who had a front gap tooth. "You know of the old man?"

Leinard nodded. "Melchizedek was my teacher at one stage of my life, before he left for his calling to Gat Shiem."

I was unsure on how to respond to that piece of information. Fortunately, our conversation was disrupted by a couple of boys running out of the double doors.

They were the two boys wearing glasses whom I had encountered earlier. It was the first time I noticed the thick-framed-glasses guy was a lot taller and stockier than the other, who was as skinny as myself.

"Colonel. Thank goodness we found you." The skinny boy with round glasses panted.

Both boys straightened up to perform a stiff gesture with their hands. I recalled, from Bulldog's newspaper books, that this gesture was called a salute.

"Dem grunt soldiers greet dem seniors dis way, so everyone knows who boss

on field..." Memories of his kind explanations stirred a tear to my eye.

No. I had no right to cry when I hadn't been able to do anything. It was clear that I was in something of a military zone, so I had to keep my wits about me. For my brothers, I had to be strong, smart and alive.

"Report," Leinard ordered.

The round-glasses boy explained about the troubles their platoon was facing with an area of the infirmary and a layer of Hell's Labyrinth called the Fourth Tier.

Any non-field personnel, civilians and company magis (masters of magic) were being escorted to a safe area called the Surface.

From further conversations between Leinard and the boys, I gather that the Infirmary and Hell's Labyrinth existed beneath the Second District.

"Captain ordered us to find you and accompany you back to the Green Room," the round-glasses boy stated.

Leinard acknowledged the boy's words with a nod. He prompted for them to lead the way.

We didn't move far when the ground beneath us quaked and cracked apart.

Leinard grabbed my hand and held it tight as he pulled me along with his plight.

The four of us stumbled our way down one end of the corridor.

We were within reach of an exit when a group of tree-men in black suits entered our view and blocked the way. Their arms intended to knock us down.

"Shit - skrit! Not now. Don't need this now!" cursed the thick-framed-glasses boy.

He removed a steel weapon from the holster strapped to his right thigh and positioned it in his hand. Aiming the weapon's skinny barrel at a skrit's chest, his index finger pressed back on the weapon's loop trigger. Jarring sounds exploded from the weapon, which sent an object flying towards its intended target.

The skrit shrieked with pain as it fell backwards upon impact of the object's entry to its chest. It combusted and became a pile of free-falling ash.

I glanced at the other boy and saw he held the same weapon in his hands.

Both boys fired off rapid rounds at the skrit. The atmosphere became noisy, cloudy and heated with the pong of iron fillings going up my nose.

Leinard positioned me behind him. He unsheathed his longsword that shimmered with a blue light.

"Stay behind me. When I tell you to run, go in the opposite direction. Don't look back," he coolly whispered.

I gripped his hand tight for affirmation and braced myself for impact.

We lost our footing as the ground crumbled underneath us.

The four of us fell into a hole of black darkness.

†

"Breathe," said Small Cap when he felt his friend's skin cold as ice.

Unfamiliar groans startled the spider. He went to hide in his friend's pocket when he saw the two-legs with four eyes stirring to consciousness.

"Ugh." The thick-framed-glasses boy stirred awake and jostled the round-glasses boy back to consciousness.

The thick-framed-glasses boy tested the jarring pain he felt to his elbow and suspected he had sprained his arm upon impact.

"Where are we?" asked the round-glasses boy.

He came to a conclusion upon sight of the blue floors and patterned walls casting oily light about the strange blue semi-darkness.

The boys scrambled about the semi-darkness and found their lieutenant colonel on the ground nearby. He was holding a black-haired beauty of a boy, about their age, to his chest. They were unconscious.

"Jensen. Who is this boy?" asked the round-glasses boy.

"Wilfred, isn't he the one we found in that Juxtapositioner's lair in the South Wing," said the thick-framed-glasses boy as he scratched at his head.

"That boy." Wilfred thought with a frown.

"Colonel," he called out to his superior, shaking the man's shoulder to rouse him awake.

Leinard's eyes fluttered open. He blinked in the images of Jensen and Wilfred's faces. He went to sit up and felt Famine unconscious in

his arms.

"Famine, up," he said as he shook the boy, at the same checking to make sure he hadn't been injured.

Famine groaned to life; his eyes gradually opened.

"Where are we?" His eyes blinked about the blue semi-darkness.

They went wide when he recognized the pattern walls shimmering with rainbow light and the feeling of the blue floors.

"Oh no, we have to get out of—" Famine paused when he saw a creature looking like a court jester skipping towards them.

"I know." Jensen mouthed with his hand gripping the steel gun he had picked off the floor earlier.

"Screw you! I don't care if you know what's gonna happen. I'm gonna shoot!" Jensen yelled as he faced the court jester and fired rounds at it.

The court jester had anticipated the attack, obviously, and danced around the flying bullets with ease.

"You morsels won't be able to escape my lair this time," he declared.

The breaking of his last lair was due to a miscalculation of pride and trust in a hard sell that ended up a con.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He had recovered a percentage of power due to the precious meal he was gifted with. Now, with the addition of three tantalizing appetizers, he'd suck their minds dry to speedily fill up his own. His initial plans will be back on track.

"Firstly, to eradicate this Famine thing. How dare I was tricked into believing this dumb imbecile had a worthy brain to eat!" The demon cursed.

Of course, at that time, he had been starved of knowledgeable brains, so he hadn't been in the right frame of mind to make a sound decision.

Now was different. The tender and tasty human that Hades Lion gave him made up for his earlier troubles.

"Huh?! Who you calling a dumb imbecile, you stupid git!" Famine shouted out his unintelligent insults to the demon.

"No, stop it, Famine!" Leinard cried out, attempting to silence the boy from hurling further insults at the demon.

It was too late. The dumb Famine had pushed against the demon's

sore spot.

"STUPID?! Blasphemy!" The demon felt his rage.

He called upon his book of knowledge to lay down the law.

"Bring it, you mindless git! I'm not afraid of you!" Famine shouted.

The three knights of the Evadale Knight Order groaned and readied their weapons for retaliation.

"Blasphemy, blasphemy, blasphemy!" The demon childishly ranted as he called upon his powers within the blue book. "Come, my children, bind the lair!"

Moving silhouettes and agitated voices surrounded the patterned walls. They sparked and warped into ever-changing images of events and sceneries pulled from the humans' minds.

"Oh shit!" Wilfred panicked when he realized the power that was activated.

He felt dizzy from the rush of images and colors pressurizing his senses. His ears picked up the voice of a woman that he shouldn't be hearing.

(W)

"Wilfred. You must protect your sister and look after each other." His mother's serene voice advised him of his place as he held her left hand.

His older twin sister held their mother's right hand. The three of them were the pitiful sight in black suits as they solemnly stood over their father's freshly filled grave.

"All of the Smithsonian Estate will be looking upon you as the man of the house."

Wilfred shook his head and closed his eyes. He wasn't there, and neither was his mother. If that were the case, he wouldn't be holding onto her hand much longer.

"No, I'm not here!" He shouted with firm conviction and opened his eyes to another moment in time.

"What is this?" His voice cracked at the sight of a group of his middle school classmates surrounding his younger self.

They were attempting to extort money and sexual favors from him.

At a crucial moment, his sister attacked with a handful of strobe

grenades and miniature bots that she had made in their uncle's lab.

"My brother's not your bitch!" She roared when she had successfully chased off the bullies. Unbeknownst to Wilfred's dampened pride.

"Why'd you do that?!" He lashed violently at his sister with an ire he had never felt before, and was surprised when she laughed with a look of relief on her face.

"Finally." She patted his back.

"Finally?" Wilfred sighed and found himself in another past moment of his life, back to when he had first met the black-bearded face of his eccentric uncle, who had become their caretaker upon their mother's untimely passing.

It was the most awkward and unfilled moment of his life when he was belittled by his uncle's attendant for being a worthless boy.

"Worthless weakling, who lacks the intelligence befitting a Smithsonian Head. Your sister shows far more promise."

"My sister is better?"

Wilfred felt his strength fading and his desire for rest increasing.

"Yes, it's better to let your sister take control and lead. Why accept a responsibility you are not naturally adept? Don't you prefer reading books in solitude?"

"Aah, yes, the right to lead was Lita's, as the eldest. People follow her because she is stronger, smarter and—"

"Does it matter? You're both a family. I don't know your life with your sister, but I can tell she holds you in high esteem from these moments. Believe in your own pride and worth as a man!" I shouted.

I held my breath as I watched the round glasses boy named Wilfred writhed about the floor before me and eventually go still.

I checked his pale, soft cheeks for warmth and realized the feminine beauty of his face.

Strands of fine brown hair flopped over his almond-shaped eyes. His hair's stylish side-swept crop accentuated his face's heart-shaped outline. His body was firm and held a balanced muscle tone. I decided to take back my first impression of him being a skinny runt like myself.

Wilfred stirred to consciousness. He breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw my face.

"Famine, is it? Thank you," he said as he calmly returned to his senses and took in the real situation we were in.

The demon was enclosed in a ball of blue light, with its blue book opened before it. It seemed to be in a deep trance. The rainbow shimmer of the walls had been replaced with pulsing white light.

"The light acts as a memory recall. Typically, once the juxtapositioner demon has bounded your mind to its own, it's impossible to break free from its link." Wilfred beamed a friendly smile as he rechecked his weapon and readjusted himself for action.

"Fortunately, he took you for a fool, so kept you out of the loop. " He chuckled.

"Well, I dunno if I should take that as luck," I grumbled.

Wilfred nodded his head and changed his expression to one of seriousness.

"Keep track of the pulsing lights. If the rhythm changes, we're in trouble. "

We carefully moved about the lair, pausing here and there when the demon stirred.

Jensen was the next one we found chained up unconscious against a wall by white links of hard light.

The memory being played out on the wall he was chained to made Wilfred groan.

(J)

"I don't care of your status. Lita's mine," Jensen declared.

He held up his glinting pair of steel sais in readiness for the duel he had baited Leinard into having for the sake of the woman they both loved.

"Brats should focus on learning and respecting their elders." Leinard smirked.

He raised his katana to the challenge.

The men's weapons clashed, noisily, as they skillfully sparred. Ignoring the curses and commands to stop from the woman that had captivated their hearts.

"Colonel, Jensen! Stop this childish nonsense!" Lita shouted at the men but found it was pointless. They were fighting with their manly

pride on the line.

"Are they idiots?" she asked her brother, who was doing his best to keep a straight face.

"Not normally, only when you're around," Wilfred commented matter-of-factually.

The duel ended abruptly when Leinard had coolly disarmed both sais from Jensen.

Jensen was heaving for breath on the ground near Leinard's feet.

He lowered his head and punched his mixture of rage and embarrassment he felt into the linoleum.

"What've I been doing?" He glanced up and saw Leinard making a move on Lita who didn't seem to be complaining.

"Of course, he's more of a man than any of us. We're not much different in ages, but he's already a lieutenant colonel, while I'm stuck with a knight rank. Damn it!" Jensen hissed with a realization of the truth.

"Yes, that's the truth. That man is a far better suitor for Lita Smithsonian. How can you match up to someone who you'll never be able to catch up to in strength, charisma and smarts? Face the fact, you're out of your league—"

"That's your wounded pride talking." Wilfred butted in. "I've always been jealous of your skill. I hated the fact, you were able to challenge our Colonel to that duel. I could never have done that."

I felt hope in my heart when I saw Jensen's body twitch and the light of the links weaken.

"You're worthy of my sister in my opinion!"

Abnormal shrieking rebounded off the walls as the links around Jensen's body faded. Wilfred was able to catch him before he had hit the ground.

"Wil-fred? Is that true?" Jensen said when he regained consciousness and yelped when Wilfred pinched his cheek.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Wilfred answered.

I gained a detailed impression of Jensen when he gradually stood up and rechecked his gear.

His body was toned and showed the strength of a hardy fighter. His face was a lot manlier than first thought with sharp features, a split

chin and large blue eyes. The spiky cut of his dark hair gave an impression of cockiness.

"Like War," I mumbled to myself, and felt my heartache with the need to find my brothers.

He joined our careful search for Leinard, whom we found chained up with someone unexpected.

I gasped at the nightmarish scene hanging on the wall before me.

My hands moved with an insistence to free my comatose brother from the hard-light links that kept him bound.

"War." My voice choked back tears at the sight of his naked body lacking his usual muscle tone and the thinning of his hair.

His cheeks were slightly sunken. The skin around his hands was papery with protruding veins, resembling an elderly man's.

War's arm was linked to a skrit, which was curled up on the floor at his feet. It was also in a comatose state.

"He'd be heavily dehydrated since the skrit link is boosting the feeding process," Wilfred soberly commented.

He grabbed my hands before I could touch the links. "Don't touch the links, or you will be bound to them as well."

"Let me go! I must break the links. Break him free!" I was losing my rationale.

I received a punch to my gut from Jensen in response.

"You do that, you're as good as a shadow puppet!" he hissed with his fist raised to knock some more sense into me.

"You don't get it. MY BROTHER'S UP THERE!" I cried out, feeling both my desperation and pain from the hard punch.

Yes, his beloved brother was caught within the juxtapositioner's clutches.

Famine's thoughts were looping through useless solutions on breaking him free. His brain wasn't intelligent enough to come up with a plan.

The memory walls weren't recalling anything that he could use to snap War out of the trance that bound him.

The juxtapositioner's eyes opened. Its attention was fixed on me. Its bubble of blue light had dissipated when it broke out of its trance.

I sensed its immense animosity.

The blue book closed. The situation had become dire.

"Shit!" Wilfred cursed as he raised his steel gun at the demon.

He fired bullet rounds, but the attack didn't deter the demon's advances.

I yelped, feeling pain from the fell swoop of the demon's extraordinary long arm.

Another strike had sent me flying into the wall near the lieutenant colonel, who was still trapped in a coma next to War.

The wall behind the men burned with a fierce white light. Black silhouettes stepped out of the light and stood before us as solid as living beings.

"Shadow Puppets," Jensen cursed as he unhooked a pair of sais from his belt.

He advanced upon the rushing horde of human and animal silhouettes that were hell-bent on one will - to kill us.

The shadow puppets attacked with speed and skill of the creature impression it silhouetted.

Wilfred and Jensen were able to dissipate the advancing numbers, but they kept coming at a constant pace.

The smell of iron and sensation of heat was compacting the air.

Famine saw that the knights were running out of stamina. He couldn't dodge and narrowly miss the enemy horde for much longer, either. The lair became crowded with silhouettes.

The stupid boy saw his hopeless situation, but he kept dodging and doing his best to live. His heart couldn't bear to see his brother suffering up there.

"Aah, but you do not understand, little lamb!" The juxtapositioner smirked. "I am God of this lair! "

The demon effortlessly grabbed the stupid Famine's throat and lifted him into the air, feeling a glorious moment of conceit.

He held the struggling Famine next to his brother.

"Now watch as I suck out every bit of his intelligence, will, chi," the juxtapositioner gloated.

The wall behind War shimmered.

A memory was played of War watching Famine entering a kitchen hall and cursing at the absence of his favorite food from the food tables.

"So cute. I love dat stupid, beautiful, git." War thought fondly of his baby brother. "I love him."

Famine blinked with surprise at the unexpected revelation.

It had also made Jensen and Wilfred pause their defense for a brief moment. The knights cursed. They recovered from a shadow puppet offense that had almost taken their lives.

"I get it, War! So... snap... out... of... it!" I spat out with all my might as I struggled against the demon's hold. "I love you too!"

The memory recall had caused the hold around my neck to loosen. I was able to free myself.

I landed on the floor with a body roll and saw another memory being played out behind Leinard.

A chance.

"Jensen!" I shouted and pointed to Leinard.

Jensen fought his way through silhouettes to get close to Leinard.

He pulled a talisman paper strip out of his overcoat pocket, threw it into the air, muttering a spell at the same time.

It called up a protective field around himself and Leinard that was able to deflect shadow puppet attacks for the time being.

I needed to do something that would buy him time to break Leinard out of the coma.

I ran, dived and dodged the shadow puppet attacks with all my might.

Doing my best to keep the demon's attention focused on myself.

My breath was labored, my limbs were cramping up. I couldn't keep this up much longer.

The juxtapositioner demon smelled his moment of truth. Famine's back was pressed against a wall by surrounding shadow puppets.

He was trapped, with no strength or smarts to fight his way out.

"I have you now, stupid creature!" The demon bellowed.

Famine's eyes bulged with a truth that his life was about to be over.

His arms instinctively covered his head as the shadow puppets and the demon rushed their advance.

"Furin, hautsi egiten dut!"

The sound of Leinard's voice, cutting across the lair with a deep and fierce bellow, rekindled my spirit.

The charged atmosphere became intense, stirring a ticklish feeling across my skin.

I watched mini tornadoes sweep the lair free from shadow puppets, so the demon stood alone.

"It's over demon. You've one chance to leave, live another day," said Leinard coolly to the pouting demon.

The demon laughed at the man's bravado. The man held no threat over him. He had already seen the weakness of his heart.

"Revert to null, idiot!" The demon cried out.

He called upon a fresh horde of shadow puppets from the walls.

The men had exhausted their strength. They wouldn't last against a fresh shadow puppet onslaught.

What could I do? I had found War and had come so far. Do I give up now? Was this the end of my life?

No! I was stupid to give in now!

I grabbed the gun I saw on the floor, went as close as I could to the demon, and aimed the skinny barrel at the closed book.

"YOU'RE THE IDIOT, DEMON!" I fired on the book with all my might.

The juxtapositioner reeled back with obvious pain.

The lair's atmosphere became heated. Static energy was charged to an extreme level. My skin throbbed and tingled crazily.

I glanced at the demon and gasped at the sight of shadow puppets being pulled into it.

"The lair is being sucked it! The demon, gonna implode!" Wilfred shouted into my ear.

His words fought against howling winds, which came about from the initiated implosion.

I forced my way to War, who was finally free from the links and skrit. He was as a lifeless heap on the floor.

"Hold on to me!" Leinard called out to me with his arm extended.

I wrapped one arm around War's waist and held Leinard's hand tight with my other hand.

The torque from the impending implosion was pushing against my weight. It was forcing me towards the point of destruction.

Leinard and Wilfred closed their eyes. They used every bit of their

focus and strength to draw a third eye cakra symbol into the air. The glowing blue cakra symbol smashed an opening into a wall.

"GO!" I heard Leinard order.

I felt my body yanked through the opening with War in my arms.

"Bidea itxita dago!" Wilfred cried out, which created a closing over the opening the third eye cakra had created.

My eyes bulged at the gray concrete wall where the hole should have been. The wall existed as if there hadn't been an opening at all.

"Amazing." I exhaled my awe and glanced about the place we had come out to. I realized we were in a large storage room of some sort.

Leinard ordered us to rest.

I carefully lowered myself to the slate ground with War still in my arms and rested his head on my lap. My attention moved to Wilfred's complaints about his burning eyes.

"Here," said Leinard as he, blindly, handed over a vial of clear liquid to Wilfred.

I noticed he was blinking madly and pouring drops into his eyes. Wilfred did the same thing with the vial that was handed to him.

"Side effect for using cakra magic," Jensen commented between moments of catching his breath. "Back there was no other way around it."

Leinard and Wilfred were able to recover from their ailments, but their eyes were heavily bloodshot.

I turned my head and winced at the sharp pain I felt running down my neck and arm, but I wasn't going to let on about it. My worries were more on War's condition.

I checked his forehead for warmth and was relieved to see his chest gently heaving. He was alive but showing no signs of consciousness.

Wilfred removed his overcoat and placed it around War's body. He checked his face for breath, searched the inside of his belt pouch for something and pulled out a wet patch, which he placed on War's forehead.

"This will moderate his temperature and restore some fluids until we arrive at a medical unit," Wilfred reassured me with a gentle pat on my shoulder.

"I bet ten daro I know why the skrit was going feral in the West Wing," Jensen said, offhandedly, as he slung his sprained arm to his

chest with a roll of bandage he had pulled out of his belt pouch.

"That's hardly a bet," Wilfred commented as he sat, at ease, with his back to the wall.

I frowned, perplexed.

"Skrit demons exist in pacts we call florets. They communicate telepathically through optical imagery. Magis and demons skilled in semblance magic can bend the will of a floret using a skill called image-binding. In doing so, a contract is forged with the binder, that's how we've been able to control them as sentry points for the labyrinth tiers," Leinard explained as he took up the spot next to Wilfred.

My frown deepened. I still didn't get it.

"I think you're using too many big boy words, Fearless Leader." Jensen joked. "Surely you've not forgotten why the demon rejected him."

"I beg your pardon!" I snapped at the jest Jensen was having at my expense.

"Ho, seems you understand what I was saying." Jensen chuckled.

"If I'd say one thing is that Famine's strong luck compensates." Wilfred tried to negate Jensen's cheek, but it ended up fanning the flames.

"True, true. There is always a flip-side to everything. Famine being dumb means that he is filled with dumb luck." Jensen bellowed with hearty laughter at the sight of my pouting face.

Wilfred sighed and gave me a look of apology.

"Luck aside. I'm curious. What made you decide to shoot at the demon's book?" Leinard gently broached the subject that seemed to be nagging on his mind.

I relaxed my features and stared upwards as I thought back to the moment, I had picked up the gun.

"Um, dunno. Instinct I guess," I answered and yelped at the jovial mate slap I felt to my back from Jensen's hand.

"Bloody spot on instinct, that is," Jensen said.

He squealed with fright when he saw Small Cap crawl out of my pocket to perch on my shoulder.

"Whaddahell!" He fumbled around his belt, one-handedly, for his sais.

Wilfred stopped Jensen from pulling them out. "Relax. Look, the

creature is more frightened of you."

Jensen lowered his guard when he realized that Small Cap had retreated toward the nape of my neck; his body curled up with obvious fear.

"What is it?" he asked me.

"He's Small Cap." I introduced Small Cap to the men.

"A Delena Cancerides." Leinard added with forced calmness.

"A what?" Jensen gawked at Leinard.

"It's a spider, you dimwit!" Wilfred rolled his eyes.

"Before you laugh at others for being dumb, consider your own lack of intelligence."

I chuckled at the banter, which seemed to lighten the mood of the place.

"I think we can safely say that the skrit won't ambush us any time too soon." Leinard changed the subject back to our situation.

He checked the condition of War's feet.

"If we don't get him to a medical unit, his heart will stop," he stated soberly and softened his approach when he saw the worry on my face.

"We'll get him to one, don't worry," he reassured me.

"This is the moment where you appreciate your handsome Captain." Trix intruded on our conversation as he stepped into the room through the far end door.

He brought in three newcomers who unfolded a sling type stretcher and laid it out on the ground.

"Do not worry. We shall ensure not to add further stress to his body," said a softly spoken man with an angelic and youthful face whose brown eyes carried an impression of a polite smile.

Half of his mid-length light brown hair was tied back in a top knot, and the rest of his fine locks tumbled freely about his broad shoulders. He wore the same uniform as Jensen and Wilfred, with the addition of a pair of sheathed iron daggers strapped around his left thigh.

"You did well. Leave him to us. We'll get him to a medical unit in time," said a confident woman who also wore the same uniform.

I met a pair of soft, almond, eyes carrying the most delicate brown hue I had ever come across.

Her bob of brown hair hung stylishly to her shoulders, with her fringe swept over her dainty forehead and held back by a pair of daisy

clips.

Although she was wearing the same uniform as Jensen and Wilfred, her pixie-like frame made the clothes appear far more feminine.

She was beautiful. There was no doubt. I soon realized, she was the first, real woman I had come across in life. This fact stirred a deep blush all over my face.

As I looked at her countenance some more, I couldn't shake a feeling I had seen her before. I wracked my brain on where and noticed her features held similarities to Wilfred's.

"You're Lita right?" I blurted to her and received a strange smile in response.

"Chet. I never realized your popularity went beyond the Fourth Tier," grumbled a sour-faced girl who would look pretty otherwise.

Her fine, blond, ponytail flicked to the other side of her shoulder when she turned her head with a huff.

I saw her features were smaller and the shape of her face more oval. The blue of her eyes and the shape of her mouth were unremarkable. Her gloveless hands were stockier, with small callouses on her fingertips and the mounts of her palm.

Her curvaceous frame also made her appear effeminate in the uniform. Where Lita's impression leaned towards delicate, hers was more of cool and spirited.

"Ignore the Onihime," Jensen said sarcastically.

I stood back and watched War being lifted in the sling-stretcher. He was carried out by Trix and the other man.

I followed behind the procession, hoping we'd reach a medical unit soon.

We followed Trix's lead through a maze of white corridors that would start and end at a set of double doors.

The doors eventually opened to a dead end that was a grilled metal platform and an intricately patterned bronze grilled closet.

The closet's closed double bronze doors had no handles on them.

Lita approached a set of symbols that ran a row down one side of the doors.

She held her palm over the symbol that resembled a bird. The symbol glowed.

The doors opened with a long-drawn-out hiss and sigh.

I followed everyone into the grilled closet, which turned out to be a small glass room of sorts that had architraves trimmed with double bands of bronze and the floor the color and texture of moonstone. I saw the same row of symbols were present on the inside of the doors.

Lita repeated the same process to close the doors. She then ran her hand all over the row to form a pattern from the bird, cat and fish symbols.

I gasped when the glass room jolted into movement, and yelped when it shot upwards and sped from one side to another at a pace faster than sound.

I felt my heart had been stuck in my throat when the room stopped, and the doors opened; stumbled out behind the group with the urge to vomit, and groaned when I saw everyone else had stepped out unaffected.

"Don't mind. Everyone's like this on their first trip." Lita consoled me with a gentle pat on my back.

I suddenly perked up by her show of concern and yelped when I felt a strong kick to my backside.

"Oops, my bad," said the blond ponytail woman, who looked far from being apologetic.

"There goes Ryoko's bad habits." Wilfred sighed.

"You know not everyone is after your other half," he scolded the woman.

I stared at the women with my burning questions.

"They're dating." Leinard provided an answer.

Eh? Dating? As in, doing the naked coupling exercises, I saw in Bulldog's secret picture books? The questions rushed to my mind. I rapidly blinked with surprise.

"But didn't you guys have a duel over Lita?" I blurted, moving my pointed finger between Leinard and Jensen. I instantly apologized for my rudeness.

Leinard's face blushed with a fierce red. Jensen burst with laughter.

"Aah yeah, you saw that. Well, that's ancient history." Jensen brushed off.

He sidled up close to me. "More importantly. What were these secret picture books?"

What?! I stumbled backwards with shock.

"H-how did you know I was thinking that?" I fumbled.

"Juxtapositioner's lair." Leinard provided another, nonchalant, answer. His awkward gaze told me he was also aware of my thought.

Jensen chuckled when he saw the penny had dropped.

I felt extremely self-conscious and didn't pay much attention to my surroundings afterward as I was too focused on keeping chaste thoughts in my head.

Before I knew it, I was standing before a rice paper door—water painted with a red-black cherry blossom tree—glowing with soft light.

Wilfred pushed the door to one side and entered the room. I followed Trix and the other man in; they gently lowered War to the tatami mats at the center.

We had returned to the lantern room. I glanced up to the ceiling and noticed it had been repaired.

"This is actually a medical unit," said Leinard. "It's not the same room you were placed in but one similar."

"I like the sound of the Lantern Room. Gives it a better feel than the Medical Unit." Wilfred commented on the thought I had had in my head.

I groaned. I really had to do something about this whole nosy mind reading thing.

Forneas announced his presence with a bow as he stepped into the room. He was carrying some light blankets in his hands.

"Thank you," I said as I went to remove Wilfred's overcoat from War.

My hands struggled to free some material from under his arm. The overcoat came free with a hard yank, but it forced War's closed hand to open on impact to the floor, and a small object rolled out of it.

I picked up a smoky glass marble that had been warming in War's hand the whole time and held it before my eyes.

Light bounced around the many crack lines along its surface, yet it felt smooth and almost sleek to touch.

"May I see that?" Leinard asked with his gray eyes fixed on the reflected movements across the marble's surface.

I shrugged my shoulders and passed it to him.

"Unbelievable. He had this in his hand the whole time." Leinard's voice was level, but his words triggered keen interest from his captain.

"Woah!" Trix beamed with delight as he leaned in close to have a

good look at the marble.

"Is that what I think it is?" Wilfred said when spied the object in Leinard's hands.

He faced me with obvious excitement. "Your brother is amazing to have held this the whole time."

"Damn. It could have dropped or been taken off him at any time. Even we didn't notice he was holding on to something." Jensen added on with a tone of admiration. "Just what kind of man is your brother?"

I fumbled for an answer, wondering what the hell got the men so excited about a dirty glass marble.

"The marble isn't glass but zirconia. It's a Nikiaku Ball that used to be a common tool for magis in the old days, but now an extremely rare find." Wilfred explained. "Those we do find are damaged beyond repair or utterly spent."

"This pretty one is filled up," Trix added on with a grin.

He glanced at the other man I had yet to be introduced to. "Saku, your calling has come."

The man with the angelic face calmly peeked at the marble that Leinard held out before him. I was surprised to see his expression change from one of calmness to anxious shivers.

"It is in perfect condition." Saku's voice trembled with awe; he clenched his slender hands together to contain his excitement.

"That's settled!" Trix's loud declaration startled me. "We're going to the theater, ladies and gentlemen."

I rolled my eyes at the corny wink he gave me.

"Captain — you're forgetting our squad is still on patrol duties." Lita sternly reminded Trix.

"Ah, no problems, I'll just call a favor -" Trix was about to brush her off with some half-baked comment and received a whack to the gut from the ponytail woman's low kick.

"Your favors end up tit-for-tat cons, and we get stuck with the loser shifts!" She growled at him. "I'm missing out on precious cuddle time with Lita."

"Ryoko," Lita mumbled with an embarrassed blush on her cheeks.

"Right," Trix groaned, feeling the pain.

"Gloating again, Ryoko," Jensen said sarcastically, and received his fair share of Ryoko's frowns.

"He promised us some R&R after we calmed this skrit situation." Ryoko justified her complaint.

Leinard released a loud and weary sigh.

"Leave it to me. Trix has a point about going to the theater. I think it's imperative that we all do as soon as possible. After what has recently transpired, I think you deserve some respite."

"Keep this safe and don't surrender it to anyone, even Forneas. We'll come for you tomorrow at first light," he said in my mind when he handed the marble back to me.

I closed my hand around it and nodded my head.

The room soon became quieter with only me, Small Cap and Forneas to tend to War.

"What was all that about?" I released my question with a heavy sigh.

Forneas promised to explain after we had cleaned and dressed War, and I had also freshened up.

"Also, Master Famine, I was able to keep these safe for you," he said as he handed me a pile of clothes.

I saw they were the ones I had pulled out of the box upon my first meeting with Trix; even the cool bow tie was saved.

"Amazing! Looks like none of them suffered the attack." I smiled at the animachine.

"Of course, as soon as I saw the skrit, I made sure they were safely contained," Forneas proudly explained.

I hid the marble among the clothes pile that I carefully placed to one side.

"Can you keep guard on the clothes?" I asked Small Cap in my mind.

Small Cap responded by perching himself on top of the pile.

Forneas and I wiped War's body clean. We dressed him in a light cotton gown.

Afterward, I spent some time soaking my aching body in the one-man tub in the attached bathing alcove.

My thoughts wandered over the haphazard chain of events. I ended up thinking why I was here.

Destroying Gat Shiem to kidnap my brothers and me didn't make one ounce of sense. If Leinard's knowledge about Gat Shiem being fireproofed was true, it must have taken an almighty magis to cause the

place to burn.

Why burn down Gat Shiem? Couldn't they get to my brothers and myself some other way?

"Why go to the trouble when I'm no one special?" I asked aloud and let out a frustrated cry.

It was useless. I didn't have the smarts to form a conclusion.

"I'm sure Death and War would've been able to work things out by now," I mumbled in the water.

I missed my brothers. I was able to reach War, but would I be as lucky to find Death and Pesti?

The fear of not finding them made my heart beat rapidly and body tense. No. If I was truly strong in luck, then I had to feel certain I would be able to reach them as well.

"Shuso, if you were here, I'd bet you'd tell me how vapor trails on blues skies will bring rain, right?"

I held back my tears at the thought of that wise old monk and his gap-tooth smile. The memory of his peaceful face calmed my body and gave me a sense of resolve. I felt re-balanced.

"Right. I'll be the vapor trail to bring the rain and wash all this trouble away."

I got out of the tub and readied myself for a new day.

I slept next to War the entire night with the hope that he'd stir to consciousness, but he remained in his comatose state.

I relished the brighter side in seeing his skin showing some youth and his body fleshing out due to the running saline and liquid protein that flowed from a drip Forneas had connected to his arms.

There were more surprises I had learned of the lantern room, which I would never have fathomed had Forneas not mentioned them. An example was the purpose of the bronze night table.

I saw Forneas kneeling motionless before it one time and wondered why he was transfixed.

To my surprise, I saw the patterned surface of the night table cycling subtle colors every time the blue stream of light from this diamond eye ran over the intertwining lines.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that the lines were etched grooves filled up with some silver and glass-like substance.

The substance, Forneas had later described, were organisms identified as dermaleeches.

Demonic parasites, apparently harmless to other living creatures provided they were bound to a non-organic surface. This detail didn't deter my wariness from placing my hand on that thing.

It seemed these demon critters were intelligent enough to collect and preserve other non-organic things in their prime condition. Information was also included, which Forneas would absorb through his scanning.

It led me to wonder what materials made an animachine. Especially the diamond eye that allowed Forneas to retrieve information and recall it upon will.

The whole thing did my head in.

So, I left the explanations at that and was comfortable with the fact that both the night table and Forneas were constantly monitoring the health of War and making sure he recovered to an optimal condition.

Forneas helped me dress in my new clothes, which fitted my body better than I had imagined.

The long-sleeved butterfly collar blouse had enough length to be tucked, neatly, into my tanned slacks of sturdy cotton. The navy-blue vest was able to hang down my torso without bunching when buttoned up.

My pants were a snug fit into the black calf-length boots, which (surprisingly) didn't weigh my feet down.

I was amazed by the actual space of the pocket-sized pouch of the double belt around my waist.

The belt pouch literally had space, yet I was easily able to see and retrieve the item I wanted.

At first, Small Cap was reluctant to place a leg in the pouch, with fears that he'd never be able to come out.

When he realized that he could freely come and go as he pleased, he soon took a liking to it.

"Roomy. I keep stuff safe and clean for Freend." Small Cap had promised when he had made himself comfortable and fell straight asleep.

Since the belt did the trick, I ditched the suspenders.

Of all the clothing items, I was most impressed with the red bow tie affixed to the spread area of my shirt collar.

I felt suave; a word Death had once described stylishly clothed men we saw in pictures of Bulldog's secret books.

"I look cool, right Forneas?" I asked the animachine as I adjusted my soft flat cap firmly to my head and open finger gloves over my hands.

He gave me an uninspiring affirmative. I wondered if I should trust the opinion of a machine to confirm fashion sense.

I could hear Jensen and Wilfred's loud banter coming from up the corridor outside and figured it would be a moment of truth.

"Right. I'll know for sure if I look decent enough for this Apocalypse," I said with smug satisfaction.

"Morning Fam-" Jensen paused his greeting when he got a good look at me upon entry.

"Pfft! Going on a fox-bot hunt, are we?' He laughed, obviously finding my outfit rather funny.

"Don't mind the unrefined one; you look fabulous," Wilfred reassured me. "I love the bow tie; very snazzy."

"Aah yeah, guess we'll have to thank Saku for your new-look later," Jensen said after he had calmed down from his laughing fit.

The men got down to business afterward and advised they were here to take me out on a date to the theater.

"The instructions from our Captain with his own words." Jensen smirked.

I sighed. Why did I get the feeling the captain and his men were enjoying some more mockery at my expense?

"Because you're fun," Jensen answered in my mind.

"Not to mention cute like a black kitty-bot." Wilfred tacked on.

"We should start calling him Kuro-chan!" Jensen's voice rang excitedly around my head.

"Ugh! Please stay out of my head!" I shouted, highly annoyed, and received hearty laughter for a response.

I released a weary sigh and went to check War's condition, reluctant to leave his side, having gone through so much to be next to him again.

"I don't want to leave him." I held onto the War's hand.

"I'll be here to keep him safe, Master Famine, and will await your return," Forneas reassured me.

"Famine. The nikiaku ball your brother held is likely to hold information he wants you to see since it was released in your care," Wilfred said with a serious voice.

I met his eyes that were unwavering with sober intent. I see, so the marble was more than it seemed. After learning about the night table and Forneas, I wasn't surprised by the fact.

"So, this theater is a way to see this information?" I asked as I pulled the marble from my pouch and held in the palm of my hand.

"It is."

I peered at its smoky, cloudy, texture with the hope that this thing held answers to my questions.

I closed my hand around the marble and returned it to the pouch. Small Cap mistook it for a pillow and wrapped his spindly legs around it to snuggle it in his sleep. The sight brought a smile to my face.

"Forneas, would you let me know straight away if anything happens with War?"

"Straight away, Master Famine," Forneas agreed.

I nodded and allowed the captain's men to lead the way.

They led me through a maze of white corridor with cherry blossom rice paper doors on either side.

We eventuated to the bronze closed doors of that ghastly small glass room that moved. I suffered a few nauseous trips through the bronze-glass room, Jensen called an elevator, to reach the top tier of Hell's Labyrinth.

During the journey (when I was able to pay attention to something else other than my queasy stomach), I absorbed Wilfred's lecture on the elevator's purpose.

"It's a way to skip across the four tiers, move around quadrants," Wilfred explained.

He expanded on more details about Hell's Labyrinth.

The top tier was known as the Fourth Tier, which was the entrance and resting place for those who worked or visited the labyrinth.

Whereas the First Tier housed all the demons and criminals, existing on the lowest depths from the general population.

The Second Tier was the infirmary, and the Third Tier held the visiting and conjugal rooms.

Each tier was roughly segregated into four quadrants of North Wing, South Wing, East Wing and West Wing.

"All prisoners are declared with a full profile report, which we have access to at any time via our maplinks." Wilfred stoically finished off his lecture.

"No one on any level below the Fourth is undeclared. There're no surprises." Jensen added.

I gulped at the implications behind his words.

The elevator finally jerked to a complete rest. The glowing pattern of symbols, on one of the bronze doors, dulled and the doors opened.

I stepped out into a wonder I had only seen in Bulldog's secret books.

People. There were many people of all shapes and sizes milling about an enormous and spacious foyer on two levels that ran way up to a domed glass roof.

I squinted madly at the strength of the natural light that was beaming down from the roof, and all over the walls and floors of polished

white marble enriched with silver and gold trims.

"Ey! Watch meh dug yah clumsy git!" cursed a gruff old man in a woolen Norfolk suit that had the appearance of many years.

I looked to my feet and bulked at the sight of a golden Shih Tzu panting heavily before me. Although, to say it was a living dog was an understatement; its fur was wire bristles, and eyes orbs of black crystal that I assumed was obsidian stone. The panting noises it made came out with a bit of a grunt, and its joints screeched when it moved.

The old man and his fake dog hobbled away to go about their business.

I saw many fake animals moving about the foyer. The people walked or patted them as if they were real.

"Hey - those animals also animachines?" I whispered to Wilfred.

"Bots. They are called bots, like cat-bot, dog-bot and so on," he responded, walking ahead.

"Right." I sighed, still finding it hard to accept, but decided not to think more of it.

We passed through a set of polished redwood doors with carved borders of fine floral detail, and along a red-carpeted hall where elaborately detailed silver scones and crystal chandeliers threw soft light across the polished marble walls.

My heart raced at the sight of striking men in navy-blue or tanned uniforms (like Leinard's) or wearing striped, plaid or windowpane suits of dark-gray or blue, polished spats and broad toe shoes.

The passing women were gorgeous with their stylish bobs peeking out of cloche hats (adorned with a side flower decoration) to frame their pretty painted faces and wearing loose-fitted dresses that flowed over the knees or to the ankles, and given shape by colored sashes, or belts, around their drop waist.

Slim fingers were sheathed with dainty lace or silk white gloves. Strings of pearl necklaces appeared to be a common neck accessory. Everywhere they walked, their thin high heels stabbed the carpet.

"Haha! Look at your face, like a kid in a forbidden candy shop." Jensen laughed at the ogling expression my face carried every time a dolled-up woman strolled past.

I couldn't help it. I wasn't accustomed to seeing so many real-life women who were stylish to boot.

"Ugh, watch your hands, you creep," said one of the dolled-up women who bumped my shoulder when she passed me.

"Oh, terribly sorry," I apologized with a bow.

The woman huffed and resumed her way down the hall, leaving a trace of a flowery scent behind. I was mesmerized by the way her bottom wiggled from side to side at her walk.

"Having fun there?" Jensen said lightly to draw my attention back to him.

I ignored the knights' smirks, shook the distractions out of my head, and focused on following their lead.

The hall opened into another white marble foyer of a smaller kind. We entered the redwood doors directly opposite of where we had arrived.

I gasped at the enormous, circular room I had stepped into. It was like an observatory minus the telescope.

The high domed roof was entirely made up of clear window panels, so the azure sky was precisely visible.

Patterned borders, of silver and bronze, ran along the trims and architraves of the white marble walls. The borders were also drawn all over the moonstone floors, forming an intricately detailed crown cakra symbol.

At the center of the cakra symbol stood a silver pedestal, carved with images of twisting vine leaves.

I glanced to the domed roof and noticed the central pane, looming over the pedestal, was a stained image of the same cakra symbol.

"Fancy," I whispered.

"Isn't it just." Wilfred patted my shoulder.

He led me to a stone seating booth situated on the east side of the room, where the others were waiting for us.

"Finally decided to show." Ryoko huffed with her arms crossed. Her eyes ran up and down my body with a weird frown.

"Going to a fox-bot hunt, are we?" she blurted carelessly.

"Bwhahaha! I said that too." Jensen laughed.

"Knock it off." Leinard silenced the room.

He gestured for me to sit next to him on a cushioned bench.

"Welcome to the theater." Trix approached me with a flourished bow.

"Tacky Captain showing off again," Jensen mumbled into Wilfred's ear.

"You say something, Sergeant-soon-to-be-demoted-if-he-doesn't-shut-his-trap," Trix said with a creepy smile.

Jensen brushed off his comment, feigning nonplus.

"Okay - let's get started." Leinard kicked things off.

I was asked to place the important object in the pedestal's dish, and caused a bit of an outcry when the seated knights caught sight of Small Cap still snuggling the marble in his sleep.

"Eek, sorry about that," I apologized as I carefully pried his legs off the surface, and caught the marble when it dropped free.

"There you go, Friend," I said, gently placing him in the pouch. I smiled when he stirred about to a new, comfortable position.

I ceremoniously placed the marble to the dish and hurried to my seat.

Saku was called to stand before the pedestal.

The room fell to an anticipated quiet.

He pulled out a small envelope from his belt pouch, poured a snow like substance into the pedestal dish to bury the marble then returned to the seating booth to remove his overcoat, belts, weapons, gloves and boots, (so he was barefooted) and other bits and pieces of his body so only his clothes remained. He placed them on the empty seat next to Lita for safeguarding.

I was enthralled by the slenderness of his porcelain hands and his perfectly trimmed fingernails. His feet were smooth and beautifully shaped, almost as if an artist had sculptured them. He was an epitome of divine handsomeness. My eyes wandered over his body, which was erect with perfect posture on the north joining point of the crown cakra floor symbol.

The room fell to an intense silence as he moved in a slow and elegant dance around the room, gracefully touching each joining point of the cakra symbol with the tips of his toes.

My heart pounded at the touch of the delicious breeze that stroked my skin, and the sweet scent of vanilla lazing about the air. The atmosphere became charged with a sensation akin to static.

Wilfred gestured for me to look at the ceiling. I was amazed at the glowing points of the stained-glass symbol where Saku's feet touched

those points on the floor's version.

I returned my attention to Saku's dancing, which stirred more static to spark white light from the silver and bronze borders around the room.

The floor symbol glowed. Its light intensified as his dance increased in speed and complexity.

Panels of subdued hard-light formed out of the borderlines. They were pulled around the floor symbol's outline by his dance. He added some high, low and roundhouse kicks into his choreography, which caused the hard-light panels to reshape and resize about the floor. His dance collected the reshaped panels towards the pedestal. They eventuated into a box of hard-light, which formed a lid over the pedestal's dish.

He stopped his dancing and ceremoniously approached the glowing box. His arms moved with bold sweeps and controlled slashes around it, stirring a cloudy light to fill the inside until it was dense and burning bright.

His dance finished with a loud clap, keeping his hands together in a prayer. He stepped back to the East join of the cakra symbol, carefully lowered himself to the floor, without breaking his prayer hands, and into a crossed leg position. His eyes closed as he chanted a mystical script.

I peered at the pedestal's cloudy box, which was pulsating with burning white light.

An involuntary gasp escaped my mouth as light streamed out of the box in all directions to form pictures in the air. The entire circular room became saturated with colors, light and images to form a scene.

I was back in Gat Shiem, standing in the astronomy book section of the Library Tower, close to the spiral wrought iron stairway that led to the tower's observation deck of its observatory.

My nose picked up a familiar scent of woody incense lingering in the air from where it burned in the room's shrine. I brushed the scrolls spread out on the benches before me. Tears brimmed my eyes when I felt a papery texture. The dry stuffiness, I used to complain about every time I trailed War on his stacking shifts, made my heart beat painfully.

"It's not real. I'm not here." I keep chanting in my head. It didn't help that my whole body ached with the familiarity of being there.

"Freend. We home?" Small Cap innocently asked. He had been in shock when he woke and poked his head out of the pouch to see himself in the Library Tower.

"Freend! It home!"

Small Cap scrambled out of the pouch excitedly, about to take a flying leap onto the bench with the scrolls. Leinard's sharp order made him recoil and scurry back into the pouch.

"Colonel's right, Small Cap; this isn't home. There's nowhere for you to land."

"It smells, feels like home." Small Cap's voice was almost pleading for it to be true.

Approaching conversations distracted our nostalgic thoughts and pulled our attention towards the two approaching men, who were headed for the spiral stairway.

My eyes glistened with tears when I saw they were Shuso and War, having a leisurely conversation.

"Can they see us?" I asked Leinard telepathically, not daring to utter a word with fears of breaking the image.

"No. This is nothing but a replay of a past event captured within the nikiaku," Leinard answered.

I cleared my mind by focusing on the event that was being played out before me.

†

"Whydidyah want meh to dungeon crawl through the archive basement to get dis ratty lookin' thing?" War waved a heavily stained and half torn leather-bound book that was almost falling apart at the seams.

"Because Ralwyn's health is not looking good, since Rawn hit her. I fear she won't exist for much longer," Shuso replied with a sorrowful sigh, folding his arms across his kimono of night blue.

War cocked his head to the side with a quizzical expression on his face. What the hell was his batty old Shuso going on about this time? It would be nice if the old man gave it to him straight occasionally.

†

The scenery moved and changed at War and Shuso's pace. I soon found myself standing on the grilled observation deck, before a gigantic bronze telescope pointed upwards to the starry sky visible in the opened ceiling panel.

Shuso had frequently used this tool to keep track of the stars' movements.

Inside the silver lens dish, attached to the telescope's base stand, was a sparkling and spanking new marble.

My eyes followed the marble's journey from the dish, by Shuso's hand, to War's fleshy palm.

†

"You must not let go of this ball for anyone or anything. It must never leave your body at any stage until it wants to," Shuso ordered as he coaxed War's fingers to close over the ball.

War stood with obvious shock on his face. It was the first time his Shuso had ever given him a straight order.

"Okay," he affirmed, not sure what was going on.

He sighed when Shuso had returned to his usual batty self upon his answer.

"Aah, that reminds me of a story long forgotten, about a time when Sol was not Sol, The Sacred Word was not The Sacred Word." Shuso began one of his many rambling tales.

War rolled his eyes, bracing himself for another boring earful, but what he heard made his heart beat with keen interest instead. Shuso's ramblings were tales from the legendary magis he idolised - The Great Magis Isaiah.

Shuso unfolded Isaiah's tale of four powers that held control over chaos and order in a world he referred to as Not-Sol. They belonged to deities known as The Zaldizko.

The lesser creatures and people of Not-Sol knew and feared these deities for the consequences their power caused.

"Famine claimed, War broke, Pestilence inflicted, Death negated. Tis the price of the power to uphold Chaos and Order," said Shuso.

†

I detected pain behind his ramblings of what would happen should the world go out of control.

†

"Chaos and Order are like a married couple. If they split, this will bring about the wrath of their children. The evil in their children's hearts will continue to destroy until all becomes null." Shuso exhaled.

His voice became labored as he continued the tale, like he was spending every bit of his breath to reach the end.

"How do we know the children are angry? It starts with the breaking of a star."

Shuso's papery voice dictated a prophecy called The Zaldizko as recorded by the previous Shuso four generations past.

The Great Magis Isaiah saw a star fall one night whilst writing in his book of sacred words. Upon the star's fall, he was visited by a dark angel who called himself Rawn.

Rawn spirited Isaiah's mind away, so he could see the world's future demise.

Isaiah saw his world burn and be destroyed into nothingness. It would come to null and there was nothing he could do about it.

Rawn showed Isaiah a pond with four lotus flowers in full bloom floating on still waters.

Isaiah learned that these flowers were the Hana of the World, which held great powers over chaos and order.

He learned of the seven sealed events that unlocked the end of times.

First Seal: The four Hana would bud in the Age of Apocalypse; one each, not of each other, from the four corners of the world.

Second Seal: The unbreakable moon pillars will become breakable by the fire of ages.

Third Seal: The golden sickle will drive the Hana apart.

Fourth Seal: The Hana will break by their own hands until their hands cannot carry themselves anymore.

Fifth Seal: The universe becomes one.

Sixth Seal: Famine shall claim, War shall break, Pestilence shall inflict, Death shall negate.

Seventh Seal: The skies shall be black as sackcloth; the water will run dry, and the beasts of the world are slain. The Zaldizko will ride forth on their steeds to bring about null.

†

The tale recounted from Shuso's own mouth was disturbing. I was far from being an expert on The Sacred Word, but even I was aware that Isaiah never recorded tales of Hana or Zaldizko in that book.

†

"What are yah saying Shuso? Isaiah wrote no tale like this. I've never seen anythin' about Zaldizko or Hana in tome copies of The Sacred Word," War questioned Shuso. The angry tones of his deep voice rebounded off the observatory's walls.

"He did," Shuso calmly responded. His eyes pointed to the ratty book in War's hands.

War's hands shook as he held the book before his eyes. They were trembling so much that it fell into Shuso's steady hands.

Shuso carefully opened to pages of papyrus that had been cleverly pressed and treated to fit into the book. The yellowing pages held neatly written hieroglyphs from an era long gone; a language only trained magis knew to read.

War's Adam's apple ran up and down his throat with nervous gulps as he read the aged hieroglyphs with learned understanding.

It was all there. He saw the mentioning of Hana and the seals. He clenched the ball tightly in his hand when he saw his own name scrawled within those fatalistic passages of prophecy.

"Yah pullin' meh leg." War didn't want to believe it, but he knew his Shuso was serious.

†

Calamitous banging, shouting and thumping noises disturbed their moment.

The scene disappeared with white light. I blinked in the view of the

theater.

I stared around for an explanation and saw that Saku was unconscious on the floor, his clothes clinging to his clammy body and his skin pale.

The doors of the theater room flung wide.

I braced myself for the intruding soldiers who rushed at us with swords unsheathed and guns raised.

The soldiers flanked the entrances to block off our escape routes.

We were given orders to stay seated.

I saw I had, indeed, been sitting in the same spot the whole time. It must have been the crown cakra magic that made me feel I had been standing on my own two feet in that played moment. I felt somewhat relieved.

Some soldiers held out large guns with round box magazines fixed behind the loop triggers. Their long skinny barrels were pointed at our faces.

I observed a distinct difference in the uniforms these soldiers wore compared to those of the Evadale Knights.

Their stiff peaked caps, double-breasted jackets with gold buttons, straight cut slacks and buckled boots were all tan. The motif badges on their caps bore a silver crescent moon.

Their faces were clean and the sheen from their uniforms seemed fresh. I gathered an impression that these soldiers weren't the type to traverse into the bowels of Hell's Labyrinth.

I tensed when a hand gripped mine. Something wet and round was pressed into my palm.

"Hold this tight and hide it. No one must get a hold of it," Leinard said in my mind.

I decided not to ask questions on things my brain could never work out, such as how he was able to get a hold of the nikiaku ball without anyone realizing it.

I clenched the marble tight, carefully moved my hand to my belt pouch, lodged the marble there, then returned my hand to my side before anyone had noticed.

"What is the meaning of this?" Leinard stoically called out to the intruding soldiers.

A stocky man in the same tan uniform and wearing a gray overcoat

over his shoulders like a cape, stepped coolly into view.

His boots struck the ground, loudly, with purposed strides. A midnight blue badge of three gold stripes and crown head was pinned, obviously, to his right breast. His whole persona was one of high importance and authority. Yet, his round face held a youthfulness that didn't match up with the image he was portraying.

"Lieutenant Colonel Aueralius." The man's brittle voice almost spat Leinard's name to the ground.

"Commander Appleton," Leinard responded in like.

My eyes darted back and forth between both men, feeling the intimidation from Commander Appleton's glaring blue eyes and the defiance from Leinard's.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" Leinard's voice showed no sign of welcome to the man and his men.

"I have a warrant for an arrest authorized by our District Attorney, the Honorable J.D Weltz." A nasty smirk broke Commander Appleton's poker face.

He pulled out a red wax sealed envelope from his jacket pocket and held it up for all to see.

My eyes darted about the faces of all the knights seated with me and was impressed that none of them felt the intimidation.

"If it's an arrest, couldn't you have brought it to one of your lieutenants to pass," said Leinard.

I felt his words were poking a stick at the commander, like how Pesti and I had once done when we tried to get honey from a beehive.

"Normally, but this occasion requires special treatment." Commander Appleton gloated.

I heard Trix sigh.

The Commander handed over the sealed envelope to Leinard.

I heard Leinard's voice in my mind when he broke the seal and mentally read the contents of the letter the envelope had contained.

Warrant SD116669 issued for the arrest of Captain Trent Aueralius of the Wisteria Garden Squad for the Evadale Knight Order, for suspicions of negligence in duty with loss of life. He is hereby suspended from duties without pay pending a full internal investigation. The suspect is to be contained under house arrest with body monitoring round the clock.

His reading continued to list the suspect's rights for an attorney representation and further conditions of his temporary incarceration.

By sealed authority of The Hon. J.D Weltz.

Leinard's reading ended with a sigh.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Wilfred's hands were clenched into fists, so his knuckles were white. Jensen's expression was burning with outrage.

"Very well." Leinard calmly handed the letter over to Trix who didn't read it.

The soldiers cocked their weapons when Trix stood. He calmly removed his monocle patch and approached me.

"Please give this to Saku when he wakes. He'll know what to do with it," he said with a smile as he handed me the patch. His fingers tenderly brushed my cheek to stir up a deep blush.

I felt my heart go *badump* seeing both of his natural blue eyes staring at me.

"Well, Jensen, looks like the squad's under your care for the time being." Trix gave Jensen a cocky wink.

He stepped before Commander Appleton with his arms behind his head. "If you wanted me that much Miles, you didn't need to issue a warrant."

He allowed the soldiers to disarm him, making some crude jokes about keeping his family jewels intact for future play.

"Tsk. Ever the wise guy. Let's see if you can keep up that cheek stuck in solitary confinement for a month," said Commander Appleton when he went behind Trix's back to cuff his hands in silver binds.

"Tend to Saku, Lita." Trix issued his exiting order over his shoulder as the soldiers escorted him out of the room.

A tense quiet lingered around the team that Trix had left behind.

"How did Trix know that he was being arrested?" I quietly asked Leinard.

"The warrant was read to him," Leinard stoically answered.

It explained that time Trix had unexpectedly turned up with a stretcher for War.

Lita roused Saku from his unconscious state by the power of a vial

of smelling salts she waved under his nose.

He groggily stood up and redressed in his gear. No one said anything to him about what had transpired, nor any words to each other when we left the theater.

Leinard parted ways with us when we approached the elevator for the journey back to the Second Tier.

"I'll see you again, Famine." Leinard cordially patted my shoulder and headed in the opposite direction.

"Let's go," Jensen ordered.

We entered the elevator.

For once, I was glad of my queasy stomach as we rode the zippy elevator. I had something else to focus on other than the thick silence that smothered the air between myself and the knights.

"Zaldizko huh." Lita broke the silence with a heavy question. "Say Famine, what do you think about all that talk of claiming and stuff?"

I felt the knights' intense stares on my face and suspected if I couldn't give them a plausible answer, it would be the end of my good relations with them.

I was certain the prophecy was referring to my brothers and me, yet it didn't make one bit of sense. What did it mean to claim, break, inflict and negate? Did that mean that I was to put in a claim for something that was broken?

Ugh - all this prophecy talk was beyond my brain capacity. But, I had to give them something.

I swallowed my nausea, stared up to the elevator's stucco patterned ceiling with further considerations on the matter, then returned with the only serious answer possible.

"I once claimed all my brothers' ganmodoki when I complained I had none. War can be clumsy, so he tends to break stuff with his big hands, like the one-time Bulldog got pissed at him for breaking his favorite cup. Death's always smoothing out our fights with his clever talk. Pesti, I dunno, maybe he inflicts admiration 'cause he's so darn adorable and..." My explanation was cut off by roaring laughter.

"Oh, my sides!" Laughed Lita who was doubled over.

Tears were strained out of Ryoko's eyes as she thumped her fits into the elevator walls.

Saku was looking at everyone with a clueless expression.

"Man, oh, man," Jensen said with a grin on his face. He slung his arm over my shoulders. "You are too damn cute."

"Still, that talk from your Shuso is pretty heavy-duty," said Ryoko once she had calmed down.

"The captain's arrest; the timing of it almost seems the working of fate," Wilfred soberly voiced.

"Yeah." Lita finished her laughter with a deep sigh.

"I wonder what the colonel will do about it," Wilfred thought aloud.

I frowned, wondering why Trix was arrested.

"Why would your captain be arrested?" I blurted and gulped at the deadpan expressions I received in response.

"Well, you turned up unexpectedly and in a high-level demon's lair." Lita levelly stated the fact. "That should be impossible."

"Then the skrit in the West and South Wings go berserk and turn against us." Wilfred added as he thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

"They cause the deaths of five knights and 25 prisoners," Saku commented. "So of course, fingers are going to be pointed at Trix for blame."

"Why Trix?" Unclear on why any of this would be under Trix's blame.

"Because he's the Map of Hell's Labyrinth. He should always know what's moving in and out of the tiers below the fourth. Nothing should escape his attention whilst the mapglass is on his eye," Jensen answered.

He pointed to the monocle patch I was still holding.

"Tell me Famine, while we're not going anywhere anytime soon, how exactly did you get here?" He posed the question to me.

I recounted the facts of Gat Shiem's burning, being separated from Pesti by the skrit and a skrit dumping me into that lair according to Small Cap's eyes.

"Hey Small Cap, were you awake through it all?" Jensen surprised me when he directed the question to my belt pouch.

Small Cap gingerly crawled to the pouch opening and poked his head out.

"Like Freend says, then tree-two-legs put us in sacks. Freend sleeping. Me crawl to sack opening, see scary scar-face-two-leg talk to dog-eye-two-leg. We go in a cart. Tree-two-legs carry us to another two-

leg with X scar on the neck. More tree-two-legs come and take us to the demon." Small Cap's voice filled my head.

I stared at Jensen and Wilfred to see if they had also heard his words, and saw their faces pale.

"You say that aside from the tree-two-legs you saw a two-leg with dog eyes, one with an X scar on his neck and another with a scar on his face?" Jensen summed up with a question.

"Wait, what's with the 'X' scar on neck thing?" Lita blurted.

She was given the order to stay her questions by Jensen's hand gesture.

"You sure of this Small Cap?" Jensen insisted.

Silence lingered in the air before Small Cap answered with a strong 'yes' in our minds.

"This is not good." Wilfred gulped nervously.

"Surely you're not implying Trix's predecessor is involved in Famine and War's kidnapping?" Lita gasped.

"Then we better stop talking about it right now," Ryoko answered.

A heavy silence hung about the elevator, but for a different reason this time.

The strained silence continued for the remaining leg of our elevator journey. My relief was felt when the double doors opened with its usual sigh.

"Um, Saku was it?" I called out to catch his attention as we stepped out into a white corridor of the Second Tier.

"Aah, I do not believe we have been properly introduced," said Saku with a cordial smile as the others passed us. "My name is Sakura Tsubaki, Esquire of the Wisteria Garden Estate."

"Wisteria Garden?" I wondered where I had heard that name before, and received an answer from Saku.

"If you are wondering, our squad also shares the same name. A whim of our captain's when he had to register a name upon our squad's formation."

"I'm sure it was an honor." I returned his smile and tensed when the meaning of his smile had changed.

"Certainly, he had his reasons for naming our squad as such, but I do not think honor would be among those." Saku forced through his teeth.

I decided it was best to change the subject.

"Oh, yes, I called out to you because Trix asked me to hand you his mapglass patch." I held out the patch that Trix had entrusted to me.

I was in awe of the graceful movements Saku's hands made when he removed the patch from my hold. However, the frown creases on his usually smooth forehead were a surprise to see.

"It is the first time a map has had to be removed for a reason other than handing over to an acknowledged descent. This situation will bear some emergency discussions with the head, I would wager," Saku mumbled to the patch.

His calm manner was showing signs of disturbance and causing an awkwardness between us.

"Um, I'm not sure what sort of significance this object holds, but if he entrusted it to you, it means he has full confidence that you know what to do with it. He even said as such to me when he handed it over." I tried to reassure the man.

Saku released his tension with a sigh.

"You are a conundrum to behold, Famine of Gat Shiem. However, with this, I am almost certain that our Captain will be reassured of his impression of you." Saku condescendingly patted my head, which made me frown.

Somehow, I felt I had been taken for a fool - again. If that was the case—

"I can call you Saku too?" I asked with a cheeky grin.

"Everyone else does," Saku responded with a forced smile, and left me in Wilfred and Lita's care.

"Cheeky. Well, he had it coming anyway," Wilfred causally commented. "Come on, let's get you back to your brother."

Along the way, I learned of the reason why Saku took offense.

To legally share the same name of a registered family estate, meant to uphold that family's honor and business vision.

"But lots of families, groups and places carry the same name, right?" I asked Wilfred and Lita as we strolled through the corridors.

"Of course, if we are talking about the greater Sol, but Apocalypse is a small city with families hand-picked by the Illuminate Group. All families and businesses are uniquely named and purposed," Lita explained

Wilfred further explained that at the top of an estate food chain was the head (the head family) and beneath them were unit families.

The running of an estate was like that of a working beehive, where the head passed orders down to the unit families that did the grunt work. The head received the spoils like a queen bee and distributed down accordingly.

The strong honor and passionate focus to build up the estate was equal for all the families. The head held all accountability for any dishonor to the estate.

"No one deviates from the purpose they have received from the head. To do so is a dishonor." Lita added on.

"Saku's family is renowned within the entertainment industry, with ownership of all the theatrical businesses and their licensed off-shoots in our district. Not to mention, Saku is the third son of a head," said Wilfred.

So Trix having a military unit named after Saku's family estate without Head permission fitted the criteria for business dishonor.

Although Saku's family was not found in violation of commercial sanctions by The Illuminate Chamber of Commerce, in fact, it was Trix's family that had to pay compensation to the Wisteria Garden Estate, the taste of a dishonor was felt throughout Saku's estate, which had to be abated.

Some business dealings with the Aueralius Estate were closed with a handshake to smooth waters between families.

However, Saku had no choice but to join the Evadale Knight Order and remain with the squad to uphold the status quo. In doing so, Trix had bound Saku to the order indefinitely.

"What the hell was that captain of yours thinking?! No wonder Tsubaki-sama is pissed!" I blurted with enlightened understanding.

"Tsubaki-sama?!" Both Wilfred and Lita cried out. "Oh, no, you don't need to call Saku that."

"I feel guilty that I was ignorantly rude to him," I moped.

"It can't be helped since you're a newbie." Lita consoled me.

"If you're that keen to use respectful honorific, then call us by our last name with a title too. We're both from a head." Wilfred smirked.

"Smithsonian-sama?" I said and keenly awaited the sibling's reaction with expectant eyes.

Lita and Wilfred's faces burned with a red blush and their brown eyes widened with surprise.

"Um, no, call me Wilfred is fine," Wilfred mumbled whilst averting my eyes.

"Too cute for my heart," Lita whispered behind the back of her hand. "Lita, please, keep calling me that. I'm worried Ryoko might do something to your manhood in your sleep otherwise."

"Still - Trix being arrested, wouldn't that also cause a dishonor to Tsubaki-sama?" I sighed, feeling bad for Saku and yelped at the hard slap I felt to my back.

"I'm really pissed off now." Wilfred frowned angrily.

I bowed with an apology when I eventually worked out that this would also cause dishonor to Wilfred and Lita's family as well.

I felt my head at boiling point when I started to go down the cause and effect path for the others and couldn't keep up with the blurred lines of consequences.

"Don't think too much about it. No one is expecting you to understand much of what goes on in our world. So it's cool to be yourself and call us whatever you want." Wilfred released a deep sigh and gave my shoulder a friendly fist bump.

"Thank you, Wilfred." I sighed with relief, but I was still determined to be mindful of my words going forward, so I wouldn't cause disrespect.

"Anyway, with your brain, I think you're likely to trip up too much if you think too hard on things." Lita joked with her finger poking my forehead. "In times like these, go with what that big heart of yours tells you instead."

"Fresh." I pouted and was glad that we had arrived at the door of the lantern room.

The door opened a short while later, I was surprised to find Saku at the entrance.

"Please forgive my intrusion," he said, and knelt before me.

"It's okay. I don't mind the company," I reassured him and scratched at my head as I voiced my assumptions. "Although, I had thought you wouldn't want to talk to me any time soon."

I knelt before him and bowed low with my apology.

"Please forgive my earlier rudeness. I honestly didn't mean to

offend."

Saku surprised me when he broke out with hearty laughter. "You really are a conundrum but of a good kind."

Once the awkward feelings were dissipated, we both relaxed into a seated position more to our liking.

"You did not say anything wrong. It was my bad form to relent my anger on you. The situation with Trix and your coming had kind of reopened an old wound." Saku let out with a weary sigh.

"When I was reprimanded by Lita for my poor form, I realized I had to talk to you before matters went out of control."

I listened to Saku's story about how he had become an Evadale Knight. It all began when he had been swooned by a high-ranking official within the Illuminate Office, whom he had met during one of his performance's after-party events.

Saku was a professional dancer who had been performing before elites and respected magis of standing since he was a child. He came from a family of renowned entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry and as skilled magis for crown cakra magic, which relied on graceful dance routines to be invoked.

"I was at an impressionable age when I fell in love with that man who was ten years my senior." Saku sighed.

"In hindsight, I should have heeded the advice of my childhood friend and come to my senses, but love can make a person blind to certain dangers."

The man Saku loved was from a well-respected family who operated military businesses. As he wined and dined Saku, who believed their outings were acts of love, the man was slowly drawing Saku into a forbidden business arrangement.

Saku was duped into using his cakra magic for a deal, which would be an act of industry volition to his family's estate.

"As soon as that man had received what he had wanted from me, I was instantly discarded by him in the cruelest way."

Saku's family was faced with the loss of honor with financial penalties for unsanctioned business dealings. The Estate would have suffered a tremendous impact, which would have taken years to reclaim in reputation and cost, if they were lucky. It was a serious affair.

"It was Trix who posed a solution that would allow my family and

our estate to continue trading with honor. He and I are childhood friends and schoolmates, and our families have a mutual respect outside of business standings."

"Aah!" I let out as I realized where the story for the Wisteria Garden Squad name had come into play.

Saku nodded his head upon seeing that I had understood.

"So, I hope you do not think ill of Trix. He may come across as frivolous, but he has sharp eyes when it comes to people."

"Do you regret being part of the squad?" I blurted my question and cupped my hands over my mouth. I bowed with my apology.

Saku chuckled and reached out to me with a gentle hand to raise my head.

"Far from it. He has given me a chance to repay my dishonor to my family. I am proud to be able to fight alongside him and the others." He flashed one of his angelic smiles that made my heart beat faster.

I swooned at the gentle strokes his manicured fingers brushed across my cheeks and the underside of my chin. A heady scent of vanilla and citrus lingered in the air between us.

"You are beautiful," he said with a heavy breath and retracted his touches before they would lead to something else.

He stood to take his leave.

"Oh, please call me Saku. To have you call me Tsubaki-sama would make me feel... strange. I would rather you call me by the name that the others use." He left me with a warm smile.

Mansion Life

The repetitive pattern of tending to War's comatose body was finally broken after a few days when he came round with small moans.

Tears poured down my face when his eyes opened to mine, and a small smile creased the corner of his mouth.

"Hey Famisto." War's words were barely a whisper.

I lost composure.

"Sheesh - gettin' snot on yah sleeves. Yanno yah cryin' face's ugly." He chuckled, that turned into a weak cough.

Forneas handed me some wet towels to clean my messed-up face. He took over War's care, ignoring his weak questions directed towards his make.

War was eventually able to sit up and move most of his upper body, but his legs were still immovable despite having feeling in them. It was as if his body had to recover from being in a jelly state.

"For now, the focus is for you to be able to perform the basics; eating, standing, walking and excreting into a washlet basin unassisted," Forneas commented with his usual cordial and nonchalant bedside manner.

"Doesn't mince words dat machine." War grimaced.

He was able to do all the basics after a few days.

Forneas changed his physical rehabilitation to light-based exercises he called calisthenics. He promised it was a sure-fire way for War to recover his gross motor functions and rebuild his muscle strength.

No one from the Wisteria Garden Squad or anyone else from the Second Tier had visited the room. I was grateful for our brotherly bonding time.

After a few weeks, Forneas left War completely to my care, so he could attend to other units; returning at meal times with our food.

It was during our alone time that I found myself struggling with conversation.

There were so many things I wanted to say, but couldn't bring myself to say them. I was happy to see him looking like his old self, that the things I wanted to say seemed insignificant.

"Yanno, yah think too much, yah gonna get frown lines," War commented between mouthfuls of bread that came with our dinner of fish and vegetables during one sitting.

"Is that so," I answered, feeling shy. It was a strange feeling.

Why was I stuck for words? Was it because of what I saw at that juxtapositioner's lair? I shook my head to clear my thoughts and start from scratch.

"Sheesh, since when 'ave yah been a worry wart?" War groaned loudly.

"Guess when I saw Gat Shiem burning, got knocked out by skrit, had to fight a juxtapositioner demon and found my brother on the brink of non-existence." The words tumbled out of my mouth.

I realized that was why I had been stuck for words earlier. I didn't want to say things that would make War feel he was responsible. Especially when it was clear he wasn't.

"Yeah." War sighed.

"I like yah threads," he said to change the subject.

He played with my bow tie and bent it out of shape.

"Cut it out!" I said, annoyed by the mess he was doing to my clothes.

It felt like we were having one of our play fights back at Gat Shiem.

I chuckled.

War stopped his teasing. He faced me with a genuine smile. "Dat's better. Like seeing yah smilin'."

"Your hair's gone thick and fuzzy." My hands messed up his unruly locks of red that had grown back with a vengeance. "Your skin's looking plump, too."

War surprised me when he pulled me into a warm bear hug.

I felt his heart pounding against his chest like crazy. Light drops of water landed on my cheek. I went to check his face and had my head pushed to his chest.

"You crying, Big Bro?" I mumbled to his chest.

"Shuddup," War answered back to sound tough, but his voice was choked up.

I relaxed into his hug and wrapped my arms around his heaving

body, doing my best to ignore the pent-up tears he let out.

He cried out his grief the entire night. The next morning, our relationship went back to the usual brotherly routine.

War spent every waking moment doing the exercises that Forneas had taught him and building up his muscle strength like no tomorrow.

He even had me doing some exercises with him to fuel his competitive streak, as he had put it.

Forneas brought in a fresh change of clothes for War when he saw he was in optimal health.

I cursed at the sight of the long sleeve white cotton stiff collar shirt, navy-blue suit vest with matching colored single-breasted jacket and pants, black boots and belt that War was given to wear.

He was suave. An image of the ideal man. Especially after Forneas had trimmed his hair and his face was washed and shaved. Standing next to him made me feel like some try-hard side character.

"How come you look better than me in this getup?!" I pouted.

War laughed. "S'cause I'm a man."

His new-look further fueled his determination to be fitter and healthier than ever before.

Our exercises were ramped up to a commando regime, which utilized every inch of the lantern room. So much so that I was beginning to fill out the sleeves of my shirt with a bit of muscle.

A month had passed when we had our first human visitors.

Leinard and Jensen stepped into the room at the end of one of our exercise routines.

"Sorry it has been a while, Famine. There were a lot of formalities and business to take care of before I could pay a visit." Leinard apologized.

His eyes lingered on my body for some time before he averted his gaze. I wondered if he had noticed the increased muscle tone of my arms.

"We figured it'd be good catch-up time for the both of you anyway." Jensen grinned.

War surprised us when he knelt before the men and bowed low.

"Meh brother and I be grateful for all yah help. I can't thank yah enough for keeping us in yah care," he formally thanked.

"It is quite alright. In fact, your information and assistance may be

in lieu of gratitude." Leinard responded.

War and I were asked to attend a summons with the other members of the Wisteria Garden Squad back at their headquarters.

"We wanted to be sure War was well enough to make the trip," said Leinard. "I also needed to see you were doing well too, Famine.

I thought I saw a blush on Leinard's cheeks and wondered if the room's heating was too high.

"Eh? Meh brother doing well? Guess I've been lettin' him do a lot of nurse work for meh. Tendin' to meh naked body day and night must've been rough," said War with a cocky grin directed Leinard's way.

He chuckled when it seemed that he had gotten the reaction he had wanted.

"Whaddahell you on about War?! Don't say weird things before the Colonel." I rapped War's head.

Jensen stifled a laugh behind the back of his hand.

"Anyway." Leinard cleared his throat to bring matters back to hand. "Both of you, please be ready after lunch. Jensen and Wilfred will come by to escort you to the headquarters."

They left the room shortly afterward.

"He's got the hots for yah Famisto. Plain as day, it is." War threw out another one of his weird conclusions.

"Sheesh, Big Bro. You've been out of it for too long that your brain's gone all to mush." I frowned.

"No one is hot for anyone. Although, I think the lantern room heating is a bit high now that you mention it." I added, suspecting the intent behind his words.

War's laughter bellowed throughout the room.

I smiled. It had been a long time since I heard his belly laugh and realized how much I had missed it.

"Aah, man, please don't yah go changin'." War grinned as he ruffled tufts of my hair.

It was evening when Jensen and Wilfred had returned to the lantern room to escort us to their headquarters. We had taken a familiar route in the elevator and stepped out into a quaint manicured rose garden, which had a path leading up a flight of stone steps to an enormous square mansion surrounded by a thick belt of trees and the tops of terracotta rooftops visible on the horizon.

The air carried a smoke and musky odor. I breathed in a lung full, enjoying the evening's cool, freshness. It felt like a long time since I had stepped outdoors.

"Come on," Wilfred said as he led us up the steps and through the main entrance.

"Checkin' in?" War exhaled with shock and awe upon the sight of the lavish and spacious foyer we had stepped into.

We had passed through a set of large oak wood double doors. Stepped into a foyer with gleaming cream marble floors reflecting a high white stucco ceiling of patterned vine leaves and an enormous open flower.

At the stucco's floral disc hung an old gold chandelier with twelve candle arms burning in three-tier layers.

On either side of the chandelier ran two wide circular staircases (the span of twelve balustrades) to the first level balcony.

The elaborate staircases were fashioned of polished marble steps with central carpet runners, of red and gold floral patterns, running the length to the top.

Rows of intricately wrought iron balusters, thick oak rails and polished oak posts still smelling of freshly applied mineral oil, framed the staircases.

"Hellooo!" War tested the enormity of the space and chuckled at the sound of his voice resounding off the cream walls.

We continued to follow Wilfred and Jensen's lead. They showed us the center of the ground floor area between the left and right staircases.

I marveled at the enormous floral arrangement perched on a circular glass table trimmed in silver. A delicious springtime rose, and honeysuckle aroma lingered about the air.

War helped himself to a cream cushioned and oak wood chaise lounge that was propped against the wall space the stairways had created.

The coffee table book, by the skinny bone china lamp on the matching oak wood side table next to him, caught his attention.

I cringed when I saw his hand accidentally knocked over the lamp. Fortunately, it had landed on the seat next to his lap. He returned the lamp to the table before Wilfred and Jensen had noticed.

I turned my attention to the wall-sized tapestry behind the floral arrangement, which was the map of Sol.

"Armia, Gonade, Tempra, Minoa, Caldera," I mumbled the names on the map.

"Pretty fancy huh? Armia our royal kingdom to the west; Gonade the oriental stronghold of the east; Tempra, home to our northern desert tribes; Minoa the summer set islands to the south; Caldera the center of our world where Gat Shiem sat as its eye." Jensen came up next to me. "A map this big makes you realize how vast our world is."

"Yeah," I replied.

He patted my shoulder to draw me away.

We followed Jensen and Wilfred to the first floor, which was another luxurious area of polished dark wood, cream walls and delicately patterned white marble floors covered with red and gold floral patterned rugs.

Beyond the floor's main archway was a large-sized sitting area with a quaint arrangement of dark leather or plush lounges and single chairs, lending an impression of relaxation and quiet time to be had.

"Looks a pretty picture. Can't see meh self relaxin' in it for some strange reason," War commented next to me.

We continued our way up a staircase of full dark wood balustrades and floral carpet steps, which gently curved to the second floor.

"Eek!" I yelped as I almost tripped on a metal thing that scurried past my feet at the top of the balcony, and gasped when I saw a black cat-bot sprinting past.

"Whaddahell?" War cursed when he had caught sight of the black cat-bot. "Dat wasn't a cat, right?"

Wilfred chuckled knowingly. "Don't cats make grinding noises when they run?"

"Huh?! Yah 'aving a go Chibi!" War grilled Wilfred up in his face.

I rolled my eyes and stepped in between the men's escalating spat.

"It's a cat-bot, you hot-headed idiot!" I shouted at War and pulled him away from Wilfred before they could go at each other's throats.

We passed through the balcony's double oak wood doors.

"Sleeping quarters or muck up area, whatever you wanna call it."

Jensen grinned when we stepped into a livable looking floor that was overrun with cat-bots (of various breeds and colors) perched on

plush or leather loungers and chairs that were aesthetically positioned to fill up the central area.

The room smelled of oil, iron, stale foods and morning coffee.

"This looks lived in," War said with a hearty grin.

He touched one of the tabby cat-bots curled up on a three-seat lounge before a rectangle coffee table that had various paraphernalia scattered all about its surface.

"Ha! Whadyaknow? Feels like dah real thing," he chuckled as the cat-bot grunted its purr at his soft touch.

"Don't break it," I said over my shoulder, my finger brushing over a cup ring stain on the surface of the oak side table next to the lounge.

This stirred Jensen and Wilfred into hearty laughter.

"That's right. You said your brother was clumsy." Wilfred smirked.

I glanced at War and sighed with relief when I saw he had turned away from the cat-bot with a huff.

He went to check out the snug setup of two chairs and a chess table tucked in a quiet corner. I saw that the board had pieces paused in a game.

"War - you can't meddle with someone else's game!" I scolded him when he moved a white piece to a position that knocked off a black piece from the board.

"I dunno if Saku will love you or hate for that move," Wilfred grimaced.

"Bwhahaha! The Dancing Queen should be grateful. He's finally won a game against Trix, and he didn't even know it." Jensen laughed.

We were shown the doors of the rooms everyone slept in.

The oak door furthest to the left belonged to Saku, and the one next to his was a spare. In the center was where Jensen shared a room with Wilfred. The women shared the room furthest on the right.

Once the show and tell was completed for this floor, we made our way up the wrought iron spiral staircase that was on the right side.

We alighted to a wide balcony and set of large double oak wood doors at the far end.

Wilfred knocked on the doors; paused for permission to enter from the other side, then opened the way for us.

War and I gawked at the large-size library, where the ground area was more floor than anything else.

Two single-sized wrought iron staircases, on either side of the

room, curved up to the balcony of the second floor that also had walls filled with shelved books.

Underneath the balcony were chairs and lounges to form a sitting area. Towards the right of the chairs was a wall-sized bay window, which was paneled with stain glass images of angels and demons. A dark grand piano was propped up before the window to complete the picturesque scene.

We headed upstairs and found Leinard waiting for us behind a polished oak wood desk and high back chair. Afternoon daylight streamed through a large pane window to his back. I glimpsed a sight of swaying trees beyond the glass. A teardrop escaped my eye.

"Oi, Famisto, don't go gettin' gaga for home," War grumbled with a pinch to the back of my hand.

"Ouch! Why'd you do that for?" I hissed back at him.

"Yah look like yah gonna cry," he whispered, discreetly, back to me.

"Was not," I argued back and saw Small Cap poking his head out of the belt pouch.

"Freend sad?" he innocently asked.

"Geh!" War made a weird sound when he caught sight of Small Cap.

"Ahem!" Leinard cleared his throat to draw our attention to him.

We were called to stand before the desk.

"Seems you've been enjoying the sights of the place," said Leinard.

He stood to stand before us and leaned his back to a part of the desk upon his next comments.

"I entrust that you have all your belongings from the medical unit because you will be housed here from this moment on."

"Eh?" Both War and I said in unison.

"Well, you are part of the squad," Jensen commented.

Leinard groaned when our conversation was interrupted by a catcall that rebounded to the walls to draw our attention to the floor below.

We leaned over the balcony rail to see what it was and saw Trix looking up at us from below.

"Hey, Newbies, make yourselves lively!" Trix beamed a cheerful smile.

He was balancing a small wooden barrel on one shoulder.

"Trix!" I waved cheerfully back at him and turned to Leinard.

"How?"

Leinard answered with a smug smile.

The library doors opened. I saw Ryoko, Saku and Lita cross the floor carrying more barrels, and crates that released savory cooked and other food smells into the air.

"Hurry up and come down," Lita called out to us.

We all made our way to the downstairs sitting area.

The women fussed over the food in the crates. They laid out plates, napkins and cups to the low table.

I learned, by second-hand gossip from the others lounging on the chairs, on how Trix had got off from being arrested. It was by a technicality that saw charges dropped due to a prosecutorial misconduct.

Trix's countless reports on his mapglass's misbehavior that sent him map-jumping to coordinates one or two points out of step (e.g., when his map-jump had him falling through the ceiling of a medical unit to mess up a patient's meal). Glitches reported on a piece of equipment called a core bridge. A mapglass replacement request (that had been collecting dust on some pen pusher's desk). All of these weren't filed as evidence by the preliminary hearing date.

So, the Defense had a solid case for the Judge to drop the charges. Result - Trix was let off scott-free.

"Let's party!" Trix had loudly declared with a mug of ale sloshing about his raised hand.

"Did you forget we're here for a meeting?" Lita reminded her captain whilst she nibbled on some sweet cakes laid out on the table.

"Here Famine. Some ale for your welcome as well." Saku poured some dark, frothy, liquid (from one of the barrels) into a mug and handed it to me.

I sniffed and stared at the dark liquid, detecting a pungent sickly-sweet aroma that was different from the sharp and burning sweetness the monk's moonshine gave off.

"Thank you." I gingerly sipped on ale out of politeness.

"Yah gonna drink dat?" War asked with a harsh tone to his voice.

He wasn't keen on the idea of me drinking?

"Well, Saku was kind enough to pour it for me." I looked at the mug's frothing contents, not sure what sort of behavior this type of drink would bring out of me and in front of the people I held good

relations.

"Sheesh, welcome or not, Famisto ain't good with the drink like meh and meh other brothers." War directed his grumble to Saku who glared back at him in response.

"Boasting, are we? Why not drink for both of your shares, or do you not have the stomach strength that you claim you have." Saku challenged War with a cocky grin.

I sighed with an expectation of the trouble to come but was grateful for my big brother's intervention.

"Okay - yah on." War accepted Saku's drinking challenge.

He yanked the mug out of my hands and downed it in one go. This sent the knights roaring with hearty cheers.

"Oh no, no, no, yuh 'ave to drink more than a taste. Beh laws of Sol, yah already of cusumable age." Trix hiccuped as he handed me a smaller cup of ale, and plate of cheese and cured meats. "Nib on dese then yah won't get sick."

I chuckled. "You really are a bad bent, getting tipsy easily."

My light chuckles turned to tension when Trix wrapped a drunken arm around my waist and whispered sweet nothings into my ear.

"Yanno, I wanda pet yah sexy self when I first saw yah. Give yah a bit of nookie. Yah given off dem sleep wiv meh vibes." His slurred voice was soothing.

I felt relaxed in his arms. The scent of vanilla and citrus was overwhelming my senses. I found myself yearning for his waiting kiss and cringing with the creeps I felt running through my spine at the same time.

Small Cap appeared to my shoulder, so he was between our oncoming kiss. His unexpected presence sent Trix squealing backwards with fright, and drunkenly tumbling off the lounge we had shared.

"Sheesh." Leinard groaned at the sorry sight of his captain laughing on the ground.

He pulled me away from the trouble and into the empty seat between Lita and Ryoko on another lounge.

I sighed with relief; that was a close one.

The women were the soberest from the others, whose drunkenness was escalating into a rowdy and competitive crowd. So much so, I was able to clear my head and reclaim my senses.

"Gaah! Men! This is what happens when you cut them loose to drink." Ryoko growled at the uncouth sight of the men getting into a drunken sing-song.

War was in the thick of his drinking game with Saku, who was lagging behind one of his empties. I guess secretly drinking moonshine for years had ensured our tolerance was high to alcohol poisoning.

"Colonel. How can we have a meeting when the men are like this?" Lita groaned.

"Well, it's not so much I wanted to hold a formal meeting." Leinard sighed.

He gestured for me to follow him.

"Still, I do want to have a proper talk with yourself and War at least."

I called out to War to interrupt his drinking game with Saku, which he had already won by the looks of the angel-face's snoozing.

"Are you sober for a talk War?" Leinard asked War, who soberly nodded his head.

We both followed him through a door at the other end of the sitting area, down a hallway that opened into another decent sized sitting area, where a number of large mirrors were positioned around the walls between wrought iron sconces and candleholders burning a bright light in the room.

We claimed a seat. Leinard got straight to the point.

"War, what happened to you the night Gat Shiem was burning down?" he calmly asked.

War's eyes were staring at blank space before he lowered them to the floor with a heavy sigh and recounted the facts of the night he was kidnapped.

"Shuso was decapitated." His voice quivered.

My own heart skipped beats as I heard War retell of how he and Shuso were lured to the danger because of the unnatural, and troublesome, sounds they had heard from the observation deck of the Library Tower's observatory.

They had stepped into the lower reading area of the ground level, to find themselves surrounded by faceless warriors clad (head to toe) in black bodysuits with red sashes tied around their waists.

"We were surrounded by dem Neska Gudari. Although meh

certainty is only from books, I've read on their clan history through and through." War's voice remained somber as he continued his recount.

The Neska Gudari were covering every nook and cranny of the tower to ensure no one was capable of escape.

War and Shuso had been hauled to the ground at the floor's central opening and kept down by a pair of razor-sharp koto swords poised to slice through the back of their necks at any given order.

Their heads were then forced to look upon an approaching man in a black bodysuit and a wearing a white marionette mask to hide his identity.

The marionette-mask-man had teased War with a riddle, which would decide whether they could go or have their lives ended.

"I was sure we'd be goners anyway. So, I told dat man to shove his riddles up his arse," War said and continued to recount on how it made Shuso laugh, heartily, aloud.

"Yah cannot fight the vapor trail once it cuts through the sky to bring down the rain." War rephrased Shuso's last words spoken before his life was ended by a koto sword.

War had lashed out on to the Neska Gudari at his back with the attitude that if he was going to see his end, he would do it fighting, and take out as many of those bastards as possible.

The Neska Gudari had underestimated his combative abilities, so faced a loss of their numbers during their battles with him. Eventually, War had exhausted his strength and found himself cornered by the marionette-mask-man.

"The Sacred Word is extinct. Your destiny is mine, boy," the marionette-mask-man's voice had hissed before War was knocked to unconsciousness.

"When I came to, I saw Famisto bawlin' like a brat." War ended his recount.

"So, Melchizedek is no more huh?" Trix's voice had cut through to us from the other side of the room. He was sober.

The rest of the Wisteria Garden Squad loitered around the entrance with him. They filed into the room to fill up a free seat.

"Guess we can start the meeting now," Wilfred declared.

Leinard summarized War's recount for the others. It was Trix's

words that stirred a reaction from them.

"The Second Sealed Event is broken," he spoke his thought.

A disturbed quiet hung about the room's atmosphere.

"Ugh! I need a drink," Jensen groaned loudly.

He left the room before anyone could stop him.

"Yeah, I'll join you." Trix sighed as he retraced his way back to the main sitting area.

"Sheesh, so much for the meeting," Lita grumbled and noticed Ryoko's heated frown.

"Tell me about this Neska Gudari you faced War," Ryoko demanded.

I nervously gulped at the expression of rage contorting her features upon hearing the details being retold to her from War's own mouth.

"Ryoko - it doesn't mean it's them." Lita tried to calm down her girlfriend. "It could've been impostors."

"No, their style can't be faked. The description of War's fight with them left me convinced." Ryoko stood and made her way to the door.

"I'm not gonna do something stupid if that's what you're thinking, Colonel, but I'm gonna get zozzled." She threw over her shoulder before she had left.

Lita explained that Ryoko came from a Neska Gudari Head in Gonade. Her mother was once the house leader. So Ryoko had learned the ways of the Wu King and koto swordsmanship. When her mother had disappeared during the honoring of a writ, Ryoko lost her place in the clan and was expelled instead of expended, since she hadn't received her first writ. She was put into foster care with her uncle who was a renowned swordsmith across Armia and eventuated into Apocalypse when her uncle's family accepted the Illuminate Group's invitation.

"Her anger is for the injustice to her mother's family. What has been done to Gat Shiem is a grave dishonor to not only Ryoko's former family but the entire Neska Gudari name."

War let out a frustrated cry and declared he was going out to get ossified before he kills something.

I could hear him placing a demand on Saku to pour him a mug of ale as the loser of their earlier challenge when he had entered the main sitting area.

"Hey, Famine. Could War have got it wrong?" Lita asked.

"War has an image bound memory. Once he reads or sees something, he'll remember it clearly as if it was the first time, he had laid eyes on it. It's a reason why he wins a lot in strategy-based games. Aside from Shuso, I've never seen him lose a game of chess," I commented.

"Seriously," Lita said, and cringed when she heard her girlfriend's rowdy voice among the men's drunken merriment. "Guess I better get out there."

"Me too," Wilfred said. He had been quietly watching everyone with a troubled expression and heavy frown. He left the room without looking back.

I was alone with Leinard.

"Why do I feel a can of worms has been opened, and it's spilling out of control?" I frowned, feeling the weight of both my anger and fear.

"What do you think your brother will do from here?" Leinard asked me.

I met his eyes that were quiet and unreadable.

"Revenge and won't stop until all those who took the lives of our family and destroyed our home have been punished," I said with clear conviction.

"What about you?"

"I want justice. I burn for revenge, but first I must get all my brothers back," I spat out with determination. "I won't be ruled by prophecy either."

The unreadable expression of Leinard's eyes changed to one of acknowledgment.

Our conversation was disturbed by sounds of glass being repeatedly scratched. I glanced around the room and saw a familiar face, who was not in the same room as me and Leinard, reflected in one of the mirrors.

"Death?" I felt shivers run through me. It was his face in the mirror.

He was mouthing my name. His hands were pressing and banging the glass on his side. I had never seen his eyes look as terrified and frantic.

"Death!" I approached the mirror and fumbled around the glass panel, the candleholders next to it, and its gilded frame for a way to break him free.

The apparition was short-lived. The mirror resumed its usual reflection of the room on our side.

"NO!" I banged hard on the mirror surface until my hands bled from broken shards stuck to my skin.

The impact caused a burning candle, from a holder, to drop onto the glass.

I kept punching the mirror, ignoring any pain and infliction, and smearing my blood and wax all over its surface.

"Death!" I bellowed with a longing to reach him inflamed in my heart.

Static energy numbed my skin. Sweat seeped out of my pores and filled up the mirror's black spots where the glass shards had fallen out, until the mirror's surface had transformed into a pool of suspended water reflecting my distressed face.

'No- wait! Famine don't!" Leinard cried out to stop me from doing more damage. He grabbed my arm.

We were pulled into the black depths of the mirror.

The Hiruda

My eyes opened to the second sitting room that was behind the library and connected to the main sitting area by a hallway.

"Did something happen?" I whispered in a semi-daze, vaguely recalling my hand thumping something.

I stared at my hand and saw it had stopped bleeding, but some cut wounds were across my knuckles and phalanges.

"Huh, stopped bleeding," I muttered, absentmindedly.

I realized my situation. "Colonel, Small Cap!"

"Silence," Leinard spoke curtly in my mind.

He was standing near the doorway, peering at the dark space beyond.

My eyes widened when I saw Small Cap perched on his shoulder. The spider's eyes were also staring out at the darkness.

"I sense strong demonic signatures. Do you sense anything Small Cap?" Leinard said telepathically.

Small Cap dropped, lightly, to the floor and flattened his body to the surface.

"Me feel cold, strong buzz. Very strong. Some breathing like sleeping or waiting. Others moving slow but strong and heavy. One. Two. Maybe three," he answered.

"Freend awake. Good." Small Cap's voice perked up when he caught sight of me. He ran up my body and into my belt pouch.

"How do you know it's demonic?" I asked telepathically.

"Don't you feel it? That sickness to your stomach with the taste of fudge to your mouth?" Leinard answered.

Now that he had mentioned it, I did have something of a bitter aftertaste that was fudge-like, and my stomach was queasy as if I had stepped out of an elevator ride.

Strange that I hadn't noticed this feeling when I was up against the juxtapositioner demon.

"You encountered that demon in his lair, so his signature wouldn't

have been released. Demon's only let off their signature when they're out on the hunt, like a pheromone," Leinard explained.

"So where could Death be? What sort of demon are we expecting?" I was praying that Death hadn't been caught by some big six boss type. If he was, I would be useless in rescuing him, considering I had no magical ability whatsoever.

"A big six boss type," Leinard answered.

I detected a tone of sarcasm. Well, if he found some satisfaction in teasing me, it was compensation for putting all of us into this mess.

"I'm not sure about your brother. No one was here when we had arrived. Speaking of, your hand. It's healing fast." Leinard gently examined the damage to my hand with an expression of surprise.

"I've always been a fast healer. This will be gone within the hour, although, I might have a scar for a memento," I answered and asked if we could use our voices because this mind-speaking was starting to give me a headache.

"Fine but no voice louder than whispers. At least for now," Leinard whispered. "So far, we haven't been noticed."

"They notice. Not attack yet. Maybe like me do on a hunt. Me wait; they come." Small Cap added to the conversation.

Leinard nodded his head.

"So, what now?" I whispered.

"We can't stay here forever. If we're lucky, the demon has chosen to replica our world, so we'd have the advantage of knowing the area," Leinard answered.

Sounds of scratching on glass drew our attention to the gold gilded mirrors on the walls. All the mirror panels were black save one, which had an unlit white church candle standing in the lone candleholder next to it.

"Is this the one that I broke?" I whispered low.

"As I suspect, we've been caught in an arima trap." Leinard sighed.

He showed me in my mind how the trap worked, which was pretty much what I had unintentionally performed when I was calling out to Death.

Every day mirrors could be used as trapping tools to imprison certain demon egos for transportation into Hell's Labyrinth where the trapped ego would then be released into a container of magically

bound lead and iron material, impossible for that ego's escape.

For an arima trap to work, it required burning wax from a white candle, the blood of the one to trap and the calling of a victim's name.

The caster spoke the victim's name to the mirror once to acknowledge its presence, then burned a candle down, so it produced hot wax. They mixed the hot wax with the perpetrator's blood and smeared it on the mirror's surface whilst saying the victim's name a second time to imprison the demon ego. The trap was sealed when the victim's name was spoken to the mirror a third time.

I was still uncertain of the process, especially, when the way we invoked our trap wasn't according to the described method. My blood was used at that time, and I was hardly the criminal. We also weren't pulled in until Death's name was spoken the third time.

Regardless, there had to be a way out. Otherwise, why go to the trouble of transplanting the demon ego into another container for good.

"A good conclusion and right on the money. You do have some smarts about you." Leinard's voice intruded on my clever analysis.

"Fresh," I thought, projecting an image of a smart alec monkey going bleh.

"So, do we light this?" I threw Leinard a sideways glance and saw him staring at my damaged hand.

"You're right, it healed with a slight discoloration for a scar." Leinard noticed my formerly damaged hand.

He stroked his chin thoughtfully for the moment before shaking his thought clear.

I frowned when I couldn't see or hear any of it. So, he had a method for shielding his thoughts, that bastard.

"You're ten years too early to invade my inner thoughts Famine," Leinard smirked.

"Fine." I huffed. "So light or not light."

Leinard handed me a salt shaker he had pulled out of his pocket. "A weapon for you. Be mindful of how much you shake out, as too much may cause blow-back damage."

"Huh?! I'm to season a demon?" I scratched my head at how a salt shaker would equate to a nasty demon bomb.

"It's a precaution. Of course, it won't work on all demons, but I

suspect it would be effective for the ones we'd encounter in here. Just don't drop it." Leinard explained.

He fished through his pocket again to pull out a box of matches.

"Keep this safe," I thought as I placed the salt shaker in the belt pouch.

"Yip," Small Cap answered.

I shrugged my shoulders at his odd response and held my breath with both hope and fear when Leinard struck a match to light the candle.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror and called out Trix's true name.

He pulled out a dagger that was sheathed in a part of his boot, cut his finger and smeared his blood to the mirror.

Dagger sheathed, he then dipped the same finger into the hot wax and mixed it with the smeared blood before it had cooled, calling out Trix's true name at the same time.

My heart pounded ferociously when I saw the mirror ripple as still water would when a pebble had been cast into it.

Leinard gripped my hand tight when he called out Trix's true name again.

My heart almost stopped when the mirror's surface became still, and I saw the room we were in, but in the condition of the time before we had been pulled into the trap.

"Trix!" I exhaled his name with hope when I saw his face looking around the mirror.

Leinard placed his hand onto the mirror's surface, which revealed our presence to the other side.

Trix was saying something, but we couldn't hear his voice and his mouth was moving too fast to make sense of his speech.

War came up behind him and pushed himself into view, ignoring Trix's frown.

He randomly moved his hands around the air. After a moment, I realized it was with purpose.

"Will War still see me if I let go of your hand?" I thought.

"No," Leinard answered.

"Okay, let me fiddle around with your free hand."

Leinard looked at me perplexed.

"Trust me."

He sighed and let me do as I liked.

I began to sign language our predicament to War, using the hand Leinard had pressed to the mirror to compensate for the one I couldn't use. It was a clumsy process, but did the trick.

"War said that they heard the commotion but couldn't see where we were but heard glass being scratched then saw our faces in the mirror," I updated Leinard in thought.

"Can you tell him to tell Trix to look up the Arima Trap Release spell in the Light Grimoire?" Leinard asked which I signed with my best ability to War who was telling Trix at the same time.

I figured Trix had understood my message because he gave us the thumbs up and left our view.

Wailing and gnashing sounds sent creepy shivers down my back.

I gulped at the sight of hollowed eye ghosts of people with sinister auras, climbing out of the other mirrors to enter the room. Their presence was causing the temperature to drop to freezing.

"Um, Colonel, we have visitors." My teeth were chattering too much to say words out loud.

The stench of over sweetened fudge balled up my senses and sent my stomach churning with a year's worth of vomit.

An icy chill numbed the part of my body a ghost's skeletal hand reached for. I was petrified by the sight of it.

"Eskatzen dizut!" Leinard bellowed at the ghost to vanquish it.

He smashed the mirror to break the reflection, grabbed the candle off the holder, and forced my body into a run around the room to dodge the oncoming ghost hoard and their creepy hands.

"Dezagun argia!" He released another spell that caused two balls of white light to appear before us and light the way, front and back, as we escaped the room.

We dodged the ghost attackers through the darkened hallway, past the main sitting area and through the library foyer that was almost obscured in darkness.

I yelped at the icy creeps I felt to my skin every time a ghost hand tried to cop a feel of my body. Their hands would disappear as soon as they reached the light.

Our flight took us through the library door, and through another on

one side of the balcony floor.

We sprinted up spiraling stairs and alighted to an open rooftop.

I noticed our destination was for the circular third eye cakra symbol painted on the ground to one corner. It was large enough to smash a whole wall down.

We stopped at the center of the cakra symbol.

I was given an order to stand silent and still. Leinard pocketed the candle, then cupped his bleeding hands in a position of prayer and closed his eyes.

"Close your eyes and don't open them until I say."

I closed my eyes and heard his voice shout out a spell, which I recognized was from the time we escaped the juxtapositioner's lair.

I gasped when I felt heat stroke my skin and a sensation of silk wrap my body, so I could barely breathe. There was a moment of silence before I felt myself being torn apart and then rebuilt in a matter of seconds.

"Open your eyes."

I blinked in a semi-lit room that had no furniture and was no bigger than a cloakroom.

"ARGH!" Leinard cried out with pain that caused him to drop to his knees before me.

His colonel cap had fallen off. The wound on his hand was oozing blood through his gloves with scabs crusted over the exposed areas, and his other hand was bloodstained. His eyes were swollen, red and teary.

"Fam... pock..." He struggled to speak, but I understood what he was asking of me.

I fished through his pant pockets and pulled out a vial of clear liquid that I pressed into his undamaged hand, but it was trembling too much to hold the vial steady.

"I'll do it." I took the vial and administered the drops to his weepy eyes.

A vanilla and citrus aroma stirred up my senses as I knelt over him. I ran my fingers through his fine, sleek and soft, brown hair that was trimmed short in a layered crop. Concerns mingled with feelings of longing provoked more of my touches to his body.

I carefully pried off his dirtied gloves, licked the wounds around his

gray eyes, and on his hand, tasting his salted tears and the iron of his blood. My tongue lapped up the tears that streaked his clean-shaven cheeks and those that had trailed down the sides of his neck. The vanilla-citrus scent was driving me crazy for him.

"Famine." He calmly spoke my name.

I pressed my mouth to his lips to savor the next words he was about to say. A delicious warmth surged through my body as his mouth opened to mine and our tongues intertwined.

Gentle, warm green light embraced our bodies. I became mellow in Leinard's arms as he pressed his kisses deeper and his arms embraced me with a fierce strength. I was weakening as his strength increased, but I didn't want to let go; I felt I couldn't.

Leinard pulled away when he realized what was happening to me.

"You say you have no magic, yet..." His words tumbled out as he gathered his breath back.

When I looked upon him, I saw that the wounds on his hand and eyes were gone, like they had never existed. He slowly rose to his feet and straightened his uniform.

"I understand now; Gat Shiem was protecting you," he muttered to himself.

"Everything okay?" Small Cap poked his head out with concern.

Leinard picked up his cap and dusted it off.

"Everything is fine now, thank you," he said with a warm smile.

He planted a kiss to my forehead before resetting his colonel's cap to his head. "We have to leave this room. Staying too long will be dangerous."

I sighed deeply and closed my eyes to center my balance with a few deep breaths.

"Okay, let's go." I opened my eyes, feeling ready to go.

Leinard briefly explained that the room we were in was a Green Room in the Fourth Tier of Hell's Labyrinth, which was used as a map-jump calibration point or a place to land or leave when casting a third eye cakra spell.

In short, it was a fancy magical elevator platform with the price of suffering some nasty temporary ailments if using cakra magic, typically to the eyes and related nervous systems. So, a lot of magis only used these rooms as an absolute emergency.

However,

"Where's the exit?" I glanced around the room, resting my hands on my hips, when I only saw dim-lit walls of sublime green.

"I'm thinking." Leinard glanced around.

"What kind of elevator doesn't have a door?" I frowned.

"The Green Room is not an elevator, and it does have a door." Leinard knowingly answered. "I'm deciding on the one we should take."

"So, you say." I blew off the rest of my questions and got myself cozy in a corner to watch him stoically fret about the room.

"Hey, if you're not sure, you can always use the eni-meeni-myni-mo method," I casually suggested and received a raised-one-brow-look for a response. "Just saying."

He stared at the walls for some time before dropping his focus with a sigh and sat down next to me to rest.

My cheeks flushed red when my mind wandered to the moment where we had kissed. I was, most certainly, out of my goddamn mind at that time, and Leinard being healed was a lucky surprise. Whilst I was tickled pink that I had discovered a magical ability, the method to apply it was crazy. I cringed, realizing back there was my first time initiating a kiss. Leinard's expression of remarkable sangfroid, made me wonder on how many other people he had kissed. He certainly hadn't been complaining when we locked lips.

Locked lips?!

"Gaah! I'm rescinding that power as of now," I muttered under my breath to cool my blushes.

I waved off further troublesome thoughts and focused on our current predicament.

"Hey, Colonel, we could stay here for a bit, longer, right?"

"That will be our end."

"Why?"

"Small Cap will know what I'm referring to." Leinard glanced at my belt pouch.

I asked my spider friend and received an obvious answer. Of course, the longer we stayed put meant we'd be kaput.

"Small Cap. I could use your help, if you don't mind." Leinard directed a question for support to the golden hair spider.

Small Cap scurried to the floor before us.

"Yes, me help Freend." He agreed.

Leinard provided Small Cap with some instructions and returned to his green-room-exit analysis with the spider running laps around the walls.

"This one." Small Cap had declared when he stopped on the north wall.

"Good work," Leinard praised the spider.

I huffed with a frown, noticing that they had formed a rather chummy friendship. Leinard wasn't uncomfortable around Small Cap anymore.

"Are you listening?" Leinard drew my mind back to our situation.

"Yes, yes," I muttered and yelped when Leinard pinched my cheek. "I was really listening!"

Leinard sighed. "Make sure your mind doesn't become distracted when we're out there. It could cost your life."

I stared at the blank, seamless, wall whilst rubbing my sore cheek.

"Hey, why can't you use that eye thing you do to get us out of here?" I spoke aloud my nagging thought.

"So, you want to see the end of my life," Leinard answered with a narky frown and sighed again. "I can't draw upon the eye on my own; I don't have enough mana. Wilfred is the only other magis with the ability to compensate."

He pulled out a small clear crystal shard from his pocket and pressed it against the north wall to transform it into an opening. I stared at a black wall corridor illuminated by subdued red light.

I was startled by Leinard's loud gasp. Hearing him gasp gave me the heebie-jeebies more than those ghost things did. It made matters worse when he retracted the crystal, so the opening had become the wall again.

"Whaddahell was with your gasp?!"

"I didn't gasp." Leinard forced a calm voice.

"Bullshit! You gasped!" I began to panic.

"Calm down Famine. It's alright." Beads of sweat trickled down the side of Leinard's neck.

"Then why you're sweating!"

"I'm hot," Leinard answered back with a tone that basically said, don't ask any weirder questions.

My mind wandered to some other definition for hot, which had calmed me down... a little.

"Are you sure this is the way with the least movements?" Leinard asked Small Cap.

"Yes. Not much. Moving slow," Small Cap confirmed.

Leinard faced me with 'unpleasant fact' written all over his face.

"So, give it to me." I slowly released a deep breath.

"We're not in the Fourth Tier as I had planned." Leinard's voice was calm.

"Okay." I calmly nodded my head.

"We're on the First."

First Tier. As in demon stronghold and nasty humans First Tier!

Wait, it might not be as bad as this was a fake Hell's Labyrinth. Surely a demon wouldn't be able to replica those nasties too. I gulped down my nervousness. There was no use getting myself worked up any further.

"I place my life in your hands. Please don't let my life end out there." I bowed low.

Leinard placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I raised my head to meet his eyes and felt confidence from them.

"I promise."

"Me here too, Freend," Small Cap said as he crawled back into my belt pouch.

"Of course." I sighed away the rest of my unease and reclaimed my resolve.

Leinard opened the way to the black corridor again. We made our way through.

We had only taken a few steps into the obsidian stone corridor when Leinard stopped abruptly, causing me to walk into his back.

I grumbled with my face contorted in a weird frown as I rubbed the sore spot on my nose.

"This is bothersome." He frowned.

"Something is not right about all of this. The headquarters, green room and now a pivot landing." He continued to speak in my mind.

"Is it something that weird?" I asked in thought.

"No, and yes," Leinard answered.

He opened some of his mind to give me a perspective of his typical

workday.

In my mind—

I was walking through the Wisteria Garden Headquarters, greeting our fellow squad members and some animachines who maintained the small rose gardens and evergreen trees leading up to the modest-sized white stone and lattice gazebo (with a gold star compass weather dial spinning on its pointed roof) that enclosed a metal grilled elevator to the Fourth Tier of Hell's Labyrinth.

I alighted to the main foyer from the elevator and entered the staff areas of white marble foyers and red-carpeted hallways, weaving my way through other personnel of the Evadale Knight Order or Illuminate Officials and administration workers.

I passed an officer of a rank stumbling out of a green room, entered the elevator at the end of a floor, where I took another ride to the white corridors of the Second Tier to check on some knights healing in the lantern rooms.

I then assumed another elevator journey to the First Tier with other Evadale Knights ready to brave entry into the bowels of Hell's Labyrinth.

The elevator opened to the sight of black wall corridors that I walked down to reach a dead end that was called a Pivot Landing. I stood on a silver-white platform surrounded by moving black tube tunnels that snaked about a gray space like tightly packed live worms in a can.

The knights affixed a smoky white glass coin to their right eye and waited for a tunnel to come into their view.

After a few tunnels had passed, a knight threw a gold coin in a tunnel, causing it to stop before them with a 'gunting' noise.

They jumped into the tunnel and chased after the dark yellow path the coin had created; their dark patchwork overcoats making their bodies blend into the black walls and low red lighting.

"Do you see my concern?" Leinard spoke when he saw I had finished with the mental walk-through.

I gulped with an understanding.

"Demons are contained or given a tincture to temporarily

incapacitate all their senses upon entry to the labyrinth. It should be impossible. Yet you show up in a high-level demon's lair should also be impossible. I'm simply not sure anymore."

Our situation was far more dangerous than we had realized.

I gasped when I saw Death standing before us a few meters away from the opening I knew would lead to a pivot landing.

His appearance was the same as on the last day we had spoken to each other at Gat Shiem, right down to the frayed hemlines that were caused by the constant snagging against the sharp edges of the glass cabinets that he frequented for his cataloging duties in the Archive Tower. His fine crop of blond hair lazed about his ears, and his head was slightly tilted with a pensive smile.

"Death." My head felt heavy upon saying his name aloud.

"Famine... Help me." Tears slipped from his hollow eyes.

"Please, Buddha, I beg you, protect my real brother," I prayed with hope and shivered from the icy cloud that had suddenly dropped on us.

"Famine, stand guard," Leinard warned.

My teeth chattered profusely that I was worried I would end up with droopy cheeks like Bulldog's from my bone chipping off.

"C-C-old." I wrapped my arms around myself to keep my body as warm as possible.

However, nothing was going to keep me warm when I was surrounded by the hollowed eye ghost welcoming committee and their icy cloud.

"Use the salt...sh-shaker." Even Leinard's telepathy was affected by the cold.

My hands shook as I fiddled around the belt pouch and, with Small Caps assistance, I was able to get a hold of the salt shaker container.

I was grateful that the thing was made of wood. The burning sensation of my palms was tolerable.

Many ghost hands reached for our vital organs, especially for our hearts.

Leinard's mouth had become blue and immovable, preventing him from uttering a spell.

I sidled up to him to steal some of his body warmth, so I could force myself to lift the weight of my arms. I was able to raise the shaker to the hollowed eye ghosts.

"Come on... SHAKE!"

I pressed through my splintering pain to shake out clouds of salt, which had vanquished the ghosts upon impact. It had also caused a brute force that sent me and Leinard flying through the corridor and tumbling about a platform of glowing moonstone upon our landing.

"What's g-going on?" Leinard had managed to burr his question to the floor as he pushed himself up.

We both gasped at the sight of the hexagon shaped platform we had found ourselves on.

Hissing steam was coming out of the copper piping that ran around its edges, which thawed out some of my body, so I could move more freely, but I still felt cold and tingly.

At the platform's center was an arrangement of gold coins twirling about the air to form the shape of an enormous olive tree with branches of dark gold light connecting to other glowing white hexagon platforms, which ran a circle in the air meters above our heads. The tree's roots seemed to flow right through the floor.

I noticed endpoints of black tunnels were stationary at either of the other platforms. A cloudy gray space sporadically lit up with electrostatic flashes and pulses between all the platforms.

"Not what you had expected is it Lieutenant Colonel?" said a strange yet familiar voice.

I pushed myself up and came face to face with Death. He was wearing our Gat Shiem uniform of sackcloth tunic, long pants and straw sandals. I could tell straight away that something else was inside my brother by the arrogant smirk on his face and the way his hands rested, childishly, on his hips.

"Who are you?" I blurted the question and received a condescending finger wag for a response.

"Are you Death?" Leinard had coolly rephrased my question.

"My, my, you boys are too impatient; always wanting to cut to the chase." Death's impostor skirted around our questions and approached Leinard, so their noses touched.

"This body's super sexy, is it not? So fit and fair skinned with lots of virility but nowhere to offload it." Death's impostor licked his plump lips and took a few steps back.

"I'm sorry, but this body doesn't yearn for the stoic macho type. Isn't that right, Famine?"

I gasped at the iridescent shimmer of Death's blue eyes. Was he being controlled?

"No possessed." Leinard corrected me.

It made sense, and I felt there was some hope; if only I could kick that foul thing out of him.

First, I needed to know what demon we were facing.

"Who are you?" I repeated my question and stiffened with discomfort when Possessed Death yanked me into a suggestive hug and licked my neck.

"Stop it! Yuck, get off me!" I yelled and struggled. I was released with a jerky push.

I tensed when Possessed Death's hand was wrapped around his own neck with threats of strangulation.

My heart picked up in beat with a hope that my real brother was still alive in there and fighting against the thing that had taken a hold over him.

Possessed Death bellowed with laughter and relaxed his hand. Had it been a joke?

"You seriously believe that your brother is conscious in this body?" Possessed Death resumed his cocky stance and expression of arrogance.

"Then again, you're the dumb one. Honestly, that Hades Lion screwed up my calculations."

"Sheesh, what's with these demons dissing me?" I sighed. "Hades Lion?"

I recalled the juxtapositioner demon saying a similar thing when we had fought him.

Possessed Death let out a spoiled child's rant on being duped.

"I did everything according to plan. Here I end up with the wrong set of brothers! Honestly, that just will not do!"

"What do you mean?" I questioned and gasped at the ghostly hand that was burning an icy ring around my throat.

From the corner of my eye, I saw our bodies surrounded by hollowed eye ghosts.

It seemed Possessed Death was controlling these creatures too.

"Trash don't speak." Possessed Death directed a proper response to me.

Strangled noises escaped my throat as I felt the burning around my neck block off my airways.

The temperature of the platform had dropped to sub-zero, gradually making my skin numb and blue.

"You're a... hiruda...?" Leinard wheezed with frosty breaths.

I felt my strangulation ease, so I was able to breathe and took some time to recover as much of my strength as possible, even with the icy hand still wrapped around my throat.

Leinard rushed through a quick fact sheet of what a hiruda was in my mind.

It was a parasitic demon belonging to the Night Vamprous genus, which depended on a meat suit (flesh-based body) and that suit's chi to survive since its own form was weak and subject to elemental and light-based attacks.

Once it hooked itself up to the central nervous system of a powerful host, it was a formidable foe. Especially, since it also carried over its knowledge from former bodies into the current host.

As much I knew my brother, there was no telling what access to additional power the body before me was capable of.

Death was the only one of us who had magical abilities, which were charged by his keen empathy that he was able to master.

It was the reason Shuso had chosen him for cataloging artifacts in the archives. He was able to identify the magic and signatures contained within objects.

"Crap," I spat out.

We were a hair's breadth away from becoming kaput.

"What to do? I really need the older Aueralius... hmm," Possessed Death mumbled his thoughts and faced us with a 'light bulb' moment.

"You're the younger one?" I thought with surprise.

"I receive that reaction a lot," Leinard replied, stoically, in thought.

"You have a candle, don't you?" Possessed Death said to Leinard in a chirpy manner.

"Don't know what you're on about," Leinard bravely answered.

He coughed from the ghostly hand that squeezed his neck, making his face go blue.

"There are two things that will make you see your end faster, boy! Lying and bad sarcasm," Possessed Death dramatically scolded Leinard.

"In Trash's case, add bad fashion to the list." He cast a funny look my way. "Honestly, didn't anyone tell you that a red bow tie makes you stand out like one big Tomato? This isn't fox-bot hunting season too, yanno!"

I growled in response and received a tighter hold around my neck, allowing only enough windpipe to breathe.

"Now." Possessed Death sucked in a depth breath as he plunged his hand into Leinard's pockets to search for the candle, and slowly exhaled with a cheesy grin.

"Oops, I guess I should be careful not to damage these," he giggled when his hand had felt up a bit of groin based on the queasy reaction on Leinard's face.

"Here it is!" he triumphantly declared when he pulled out the remaining piece of the church candle, which had been taken from the second sitting room back at the fake headquarters.

"Now, normally one would need a mirror to perform a dimension slip." Possessed Death had put on a professor's voice. "Not to be mistaken for an arima trap that is only good for containing, which I bet you boys had cleverly thought you were in."

"Alas, no mirrors." He faked his disappointment.

"Sheesh, you're annoying," I hissed through my weakened breath.

"You know, this piece of trash is really starting to bug me." Possessed Death frowned.

I yelped when the ghostly hand around my neck had swung my body with brute force and sent me flying across the other side of the platform.

I landed near a stationary opening of a black tunnel that had been previously out of my view.

My arm felt broken, and I was barely able to sit up from the pain, but at least I was able to breathe properly again.

I thanked my lucky stars that the toss hadn't left me with a broken neck.

Leinard soon followed, falling to the floor with a heavy thump and his hand rubbing at this head.

"Fortunately, this body was well cared for and brimming with an alchemist's wet dream of knowledge from Gat Shiem. Knowledge not known anywhere else in Sol," Possessed Death said as he approached

us.

I noticed Leinard's body tense when Possessed Death pointed out a large amount of gold spinning about the center that made up the olive tree and a big clear quartz shard lying on the ground not too far from where we both were thrown.

Leinard noted, in my mind, that the quartz would have been the hiruda's prison, which it had somehow managed to escape.

"So, let's get this little chemistry experiment underway, shall we?" Possessed Death cackled madly as he grabbed a handful of the gold coins and laid them to the ground next to Leinard whose head and limbs were bound tightly by many hands from hollowed eye ghosts.

I gulped nervously when he easily called upon a fire spell to burn the gold down until it was liquid then pressed the flat end of the large clear quartz shard firmly to the gold puddle, so the other flat part of the shard was facing up and a reflection could be seen. He had made a mirror.

"Now look into the mirror, my lovely, and call out your brother's true name," said Possessed Death as he lit the candle and forced blood from Leinard's finger by cutting it against a sharp edge of the shard.

Leinard cried out as he desperately fought against the hollowed eye ghosts that were keeping his face fixed to the mirror. He closed his eyes and had cold fingers burn his lids, so they reflectively opened.

"Don't look away, lest you want this body to be grieving over the loss of his younger, dumb, brother," Possessed Death warned.

He repeated the ritual we had performed earlier by smearing Leinard's blood and the melted wax to the quartz mirror. "Call out his name."

"No," Leinard spat out.

"I'll kill Famine."

My face was going hot and blue from the hands that were strangling me. The pain I felt to my eyes was making my thoughts scramble into a panic. It hurt. I could barely see, and my ears began ringing loudly as a burning feeling was threatening to make my head explode.

"Do it!" Possessed Death shouted with seriousness.

"Do...n't" I hissed pitifully and almost choked on my breath that wasn't able to come out of my throat. I felt the corners of my lips and my jaw soaked with spittle.

I closed my eyes when I heard Leinard call out Trix's name three times, and opened them when I felt my neck released, and I could catch my breath.

"Ha! He comes," Possessed Death gloated with a madman's laugh when Trix's image swam into focus on the mirror.

He pressed his hand to the surface and muttered a spell, and as he gradually retracted his hand, he had successfully sucked Trix into our dimension through a shimmering mirror portal that had been rebounded off the quartz's surface as a prism would bounce rays of rainbow light into the air.

He moved the shard to one side to close the portal upon Trix's entry.

He hadn't realized Trix hadn't come alone until he saw his hand was gripping the arm of another man, who wore the navy-blue garb of an Evadale Knight.

Both men dropped, unconscious, to the ground near us.

"Goddammit! Why can't you people ever be alone?! Why wasn't he with War?!" Possessed Death ranted and childishly stamped his feet to the ground.

"Colin Treinaton," Leinard said in my mind.

My attention went back to Possessed Death's rant, which had become louder and more annoying.

"I WANT WAR! Is it too much to ask?" He finished his rant with a deep sigh and flashed me a snarky look. "Well, I don't need you anymore, so... BE GONE!"

The Banshee

I felt that something or someone else had been tossed in behind me as I was falling. I landed on a warm ground with a heavy thump and braised skin to my elbows.

Someone else had dropped next to me; I glanced in the face of the unexpected tagalong Leinard had identified as Colin Treinaton.

"Freend? Where we? You okay?" I heard Small Cap's voice stir back to consciousness and detected his rustling in the belt pouch.

Fortunately, he had been passed out inside the belt pouch throughout the whole affair with Possessed Death, since his body can't handle the extreme cold.

I sighed with relief that he hadn't suffered any serious impacts, especially, to his brain. It seemed being in a warmer place was able to awaken his body.

"Ok... I guess," I slurred with drool oozing out of my mouth, which I roughly wiped off on my sleeve and winced at the jarring pain I felt to my arm.

The break was healing, but the pain was still present. I allowed myself a moment to deal with it better, warm up and be less of a stiff. It was hard to ignore the heated gaze I felt on my face.

"I'm Famine," I blurted before the man had a chance to voice his question on my identity.

The man huffed, scornfully, and moved around to push himself up off the ground.

He seemed the same age as Trix and taller, I guessed over six feet, and leaner but far from being a skinny runt like me based on the way his dark patchwork overcoat was fitted, smoothly, to his body and his broad shoulders.

Like Trix and the others of the Wisteria Garden Squad, he wore a white shirt, navy-blue vest, tie and pants tucked into black calf-length boots.

However, his vest had a pair of slit pockets where a Single Albert

chain, of silver quality, was dangling down between the loop hook connected to the middle buttonhole and the left slit pocket that had the top of a fob watch peeking out.

He wore stylish thin-framed glasses, which drew out his green eyes rather than hide them. They sparkled, especially, against his smooth tanned skin. His hair was as black as mine, cut short and slicked back off his face, which held an impression of stoicism that was softened to one of a mild manner prince due to his delicate features.

Despite his appearances, I suspected he had an acerbic attitude and astute mind.

My eyes widen when two of his fingers did a swooping scissors action near his chest. Was he using sign language?

I decided to test the theory and responded back with my name, spelling it out by raising and closing my fingers in a certain sequence and making a paw here and there against my chest. I added further hand movements to say that I wasn't the idiot he had mistaken me for earlier.

The man's features relaxed into one of laughter; he flashed me a lopsided smirk.

"Fine. I'm Colin, Captain of Orion Squad," he signed his name, title and some additional chatter." Now that formalities are out of the way. Let's get out of here."

I cocked my head to one side with curiosity when Colin had pulled a smoky white glass coin from his right slit pocket and pressed it to his natural right eye, causing the coin's material to transform into a thin layer of silver-gray film that clung to his eyelid.

"What's that for?" I signed my questioned and growled at his response.

"A maplink. I can't be bothered to explain it to a dumbdora," he signed and moved around the red-brick room we had landed in for a way out.

Colin's hand tapped and felt around the red brick, making it glow and fade in the places where he touched.

He eventually stopped his touches to a section of wall near the south of where I stood, removed a small clear quartz shard from an inner pocket of his overcoat that he placed it on a part of the wall to transform it into an opening.

We entered an obsidian stone corridor with the occasional red brick on the walls and walked in a direction that I hoped led us back to Trix, Leinard and Death.

Colin paused a few steps ahead and sniffed the air. I guess he had also noticed the weak smell of iron and an astringent odor in the air.

"Is this an unusual smell?" I signed and received a nod for a confirmation, which made me gulp with an uneasy thought.

He motioned for us to continue in our direction but cautiously and with as little sound as possible; stopped us again when we saw thin silver threads strewn, messily, across the walls.

"What's wrong Small Cap?" I asked when I noticed him trembling from the belt pouch.

"Me don't like web-spinners. Scary." His voice was shaky in my head.

Colin expressed interest in my concerns.

I informed him of how Small Cap was spooked by 'web-spinners'.

"Web-spinners? Who's Small Cap?" Colin's hands calmly signed his questions.

He stifled a cry of shock at the sight of Small Cap's head poking out of the belt pouch.

"So, he thinks another spider is up ahead?" he signed with smooth and swift hand movements and released a few purposed breaths.

"A web-spinner type." My fingers trembled in response.

Like Small Cap, I didn't fancy those type of spiders either, having been bitten a few times by the poisonous ones. It was because of those scary spiders, I had realized my fast healing ability. Albeit in a very painful way.

"We better find the path around those creatures," Colin recommended, and glanced around the black wall corridor.

He motioned for me to keep still and close to his side. We stood in one spot for a while, waiting for something to happen.

I made a weird noise when the black walls of the corridor began to grunt and grind loudly as they broke away, a brick at a time.

Colin signaled to take four steps to the right, six steps back, one to the left and then stay still. He assumed the step directly in front of me.

We both waited and watched the black and red bricks of the corridor walls rebuild itself, like a jigsaw puzzle, into a new path that

we were facing. The old path was nowhere to be seen.

"Let's go and quickly. I estimate another twenty minutes for a new path formation," his hands sped through.

He led the way, with quick strides, down the path.

Small Cap and I sighed with relief when the new path didn't hold the tell-tale signs of a web-spinner.

It looked like Colin had found a path around such a creature's lair, or, so we had thought.

I ran into his back when he suddenly stopped. The sight he was seeing made me whimper.

The path had led us into a dead end that was some sort of red-brick cavern.

"This is strange. I followed the gold path that should take us back to the Lotus Bridge," his hands stoically explained.

He added (after some coaxing) that the Lotus Bridge was the platform area with the gold coin olive tree.

He released a few deep breaths and closed his eyes as if to calm himself.

If he was doing his best to keep calm, both Small Cap and I were ready to wet ourselves.

I cowardly clung behind the good knight's back.

The entire black wall was covered, disgustingly, with white silk webbing and messily wrapped cocoons that had the tops of black shriveled (I presumed) heads poking out.

"Me don't like web-spinners," Small Cap said, frightened.

The great huntsman spider cowered further in the belt pouch.

"Sheesh. A spider afraid of a spider... Shit, those heads are creeping me out!" I tried to sound tough and failed.

I clung closer to Colin's back, which heaved with a heavy sigh.

"Aah, who enters my lair?" A deep and smooth voice resonated around the cavern, which sent a mad flurry of chills up and down my spine.

Panic sent my heart pounding madly against my chest, beads of sweat trickled down the sides of my neck.

Colin unsheathed a pair of short swords from his belt. He braced himself for a fight.

I took a few steps back and calmed my panic with a few deep

breaths, convincing myself that it was just a spider. I've faced far worse and have lived to tell the tale.

"Well, well, some nice guests have arrived." The deep voice spoke next to my ear.

I trembled and mumbled incomprehensible nonsense when I realized the voice was above me.

He raised his swords before the web-spinner, which was nothing like the types I had come across before. It was ten times worse.

I felt it was the most appropriate time to confess my sins and brace myself for Buddha.

My body shook from the heavy thud the web-spinner's body had caused when it dropped to the ground to stand before us.

"Mr Black Spider, my you doth look radiant today," I formally addressed the black redback spider that had legs (each the span of two men) ending in points sharp as swords.

The spider's eyes were barely visible on its head. Its backside had a sharp stinger that was twitching animatedly, like how a man would flex his muscles before dealing a lethal punch.

It easily towered over us, with twice the height of Colin.

"Spider? Ho, ho, ho, I see you are not the educated one." The spider let out a sinister chuckle. "I'm a banshee, but I suppose that information is irrelevant."

I gulped down my fear, instinctively recalling as the banshee advanced with teasing and testing steps.

"He's gonna wait one, maybe, two breaths then pounce if he's like me," Small Cap calmly informed whilst burying himself deeper in the belt pouch.

I tapped Colin's shoulder to get his attention and quickly summarized this fact with my hands.

This made him readjust his attack strategy and pull out a red ball, which he smashed to the ground to create a cloud of smoke we could hide behind.

He pulled me into a frantic run around the cavern, through narrower paths and pockets that we hoped would take us out into a clear area.

My panic increased when everywhere I looked was more webbing. It was sticking to our boots and slowing down our plight.

He paused to pull me behind him again.

I clung to his back.

"Buddha!" I screamed pitifully when our bodies were jolted by the heavy landing the banshee's body had made to the ground before us.

The cavern echoed with the spider's triumph laughter, along with many agitated scratching and tapping noises on the rock walls.

We were totally screwed.

"You bleed, I dine!" The banshee made a sound like smacking lips together.

It lifted its backside and lowered its front for a pounce.

"Gaah!" I gagged at the astringent taste that went into my mouth when the banshee's body disturbed the air with its leap for us.

Colin sheathed his swords. His body glowed white-blue from the fluid movements his arms and hands made in an elegance dance.

I remembered a time when I had sat and watched the old monks from Gat Shiem doing a similar dance in the meditation gardens one sunrise.

They had called these movements bidea, (a path). A form of movement-based magic used to invoke an ultimate and supreme state of being.

A bidea master was able to control the airborne elements of our world. It wasn't a common practice, being a newly founded practice and not recognized as a skill set belonging to The Sacred Word.

Colin's mastery at calling upon the air elements within the cavern was captivating that I had almost forgotten we were fighting for our lives. A curt cry from the banshee brought me back to reality.

The banshee let out another shrill cry when it bounced off the white energy shield that protected us.

It bellowed with frustration when the shield blocked its counter-attack and scurried about the cavern walls and ceiling for a vantage point.

I yelped when it reared its body over my head, baring its razor-sharp pincers. A concentrated force of white air held back its killing blow. I scurried out of its path to stand behind Colin.

His bidea dance caused a protective force field around us.

"It won't last. Need a plan," his hands sped through in conversation.

I nodded my head, trying to think of something.

We were stuck in a cavern with no obvious exit and our way hampered by sticky webbing that would likely be our end if we got caught within them.

Colin added a creepy fact that he had seen children version of the banshee waiting in the shadows. So, we were surrounded. He was the only one with the skills to fight them.

"How do we get out?" I signed without a clue on how we'd achieve the impossible.

"One way. Kill the Banshees. All of them," he answered nonchalantly.

The way he was able to remain cool and collected was beginning to piss me off.

"Oh yes, kill the banshee, not a problem, it'll be all in a day's work, except for the fact, THAT THEY'RE FREAKY NASTY DEMONS LIKELY TO EAT MY HEAD BEFORE I GET TO THEM!" The words blurted and fumbled out of my mouth and hands.

Speaking my fears seemed to have calmed me. I felt a lot more in control and refreshed after exhaling a few deep breaths.

"Better?" He smirked.

"Quite," I said and nodded coolly.

Jarring thuds and sizzles against the force field remind us of the importance of time.

"I need you to keep the enemy at bay while I find the exit," he ordered and handed me his two guns from holsters that were strapped to his sides beneath his overcoat.

They were slightly different to the ones that Jensen and Wilfred used. His guns were heavier, thicker and had a better grip. There was a round chamber that housed 24 small bullets near the loophole trigger.

He ran me through the basics of releasing the safety, cocking the triggers for firing and disarming, and the actual firing. Also, how to use the tiny tip on the barrel as a viewfinder to lock onto a point of a target.

"Don't worry about bullets running out. The chamber automatically refreshes," he signed. "I'll reset the force field to repel the immediate attacks around us. You will then keep the banshee brats and Big Mama Banshee at bay while I find us a way out."

"You better not take bloody long," I grumbled as I cocked the guns, readying myself for the task at hand.

It seemed to bring something of a twisted smile to the knight's face.

Colin refocused the energy field to reflect the immediate spider attacks away from us.

I aimed the guns at the approaching Big Mama Banshee and fired.

The large redback spider reeled backwards with pain from the deep impact it felt to a set of its eyes.

"Ugh! Suck out their brains!" Big Mama Banshee shrieked and called out children reinforcements. "SUCK OUT EVERYTHING!"

I fired off rapid rounds to dampen the advancing tide of normal-sized redback spiders scurrying towards us, whilst Colin pulled out his crystal shard to home in on a way out.

He signaled that he had found the exit, which was blocked by a mass of webbing and a clutter of spiders.

He moved his arms in another bidea sequence that created a repelling barrier around us. It was keeping the clusters from crawling on us, but it wouldn't hold them back for long.

I yelped at the small spider that leapt for my face, which ended as splatter against the wall from my gunfire; I was able to repeat the fate for a lot of other spiders that went for a kill.

However, my arms were tired, not accustomed to handling the weapons for long.

"Famine... Help me!" I heard Death's voice and saw the hollowed eye ghost version of himself standing on the other side of the repellent barrier.

"Death!" I yelled out and felt Colin's firm grip on my arm.

He increased the strength of the barrier and drew my attention to Big Mama Banshee behind him. I noticed a fine thread of bluish white light linking the two.

"I was gifted with your brother's ego. Such a fine, tasty morsel. Pity, it wasn't the real thing." The banshee's words toyed with my emotions as it paraded around our fortified barrier for a weakness.

My heart raced with fear and anger at the sight of Death's ego weakening and becoming stronger upon a pull of the link the banshee controlled.

"Famine... Don't list... be... bound—" Death was trying to tell me something, but his voice changed back to its earlier cry for help upon a pull of the link.

It was obvious that the banshee was attempting to lure me out of the protective barrier.

"Is this really my brother's ego?" I placed the guns down and signed with hopes Colin would give me a definite answer.

He peered at Death's hollowed eye impression, the banshee and me.

"Your brother's good as null," he replied.

"He's not - his egos there!" I answered back with a hope he was lying.

"You need a body for that ego," he coolly explained.

"I'll give him mine!" I was becoming desperate.

"You'll be good as null. His ego, the soul, goes in, your soul goes out. Like trying to pour a full cup of water into another full cup."

My mind scrambled for a solution to save my brother, even if that salvation was to bring his soul to peace. There was no way in hell I was leaving any essence of Death attached to that thing.

"What if I cut him loose from Big Mama Banshee?"

"The soul will fade out to null," he levelly commented.

"Is there nothing that can be done?" I begged Colin with burning hope. "I'll do anything to save my brother."

Colin cocked his head to one side and coolly signed, "Anything?"

I gasped with exasperation. Surely, he wasn't suggesting some shonky business dealing at this point and time? My fists curled with an urge to punch the knight's smug face.

"This is not a time to make deals!" I hissed.

Colin chuckled and patted my head condescendingly.

"My condolences. I am only interested in getting out of here alive with you."

I picked up his guns. "I'll find a way to save my brother. Do whatever the hell you want. I'm stealing your guns. "

"I can see why the Aueralius Brothers are captivated by you. You hold my interest too. Okay, I'll help you in exchange for a kiss," he smoothly commented and demanded.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND?!" I shouted, which excited the masses of banshee circling the perimeter of our barrier.

He chuckled and flashed me a cocky grin that reminded me of Trix.

"Fine. Make it quick." I released my frustrations with a weary sigh.

His arms wrapped my waist and reeled me close to his body, so our

noses were almost touching.

A fragrant aroma of vanilla-citrus lingered the air between us.

I naturally relaxed in his arms and braced myself for the kiss.

He opened his mouth to mine, making my cheeks flush from the hot sensation of his lips and tongue.

Delicate green light wrapped our bodies as our kisses deepened. My strength weakened as his increased. He pulled out of the kiss before I was about to collapse in his arms.

"Not only beautiful, you have the refreshing gifts of a hira," he signed, allowing me to reclaim my composure.

"Happy now?" I said and ended my signing with a rude finger.

"Quite." He chuckled.

He resumed a serious tone as he ran through a makeshift plan of how we would save Death's ego and escape the banshee's lair.

"I know a spell that can grant your heart's desire, but it has produced certain side effects on some past occasions." Colin's expression was void of his earlier teasing and smugness.

"You're still keen to salvage your brother's ego?" he asked with an attitude of confirming a business deal.

"Yes," I adamantly answered.

"Can you ask your spider friend this question?"

I cocked my head to one side with a pensive frown. "Okay."

"Will you temporarily give your body to the ego of your friend's brother? Even if it could mean yourself being nullified?" Colin carefully signed, so I could not mistake his words and the implications behind them.

I felt troubled by the fact that the cost of transferring an ego to the form of another could mean the loss of losing one.

If Colin believed that it was possible for Small Cap's body to contain Death, what other options did we have?

"What about Small Cap?" I asked

"The spell allows for two contrasting egos to coexist in the same meat suit. The ego of a spider and human most definitely fits the criteria."

"Small Cap. Can we use your body for Death's ego until we're able to return him to his body?" I reluctantly asked the spider.

"What? Freend need... my body?" Small Cap rephrased nervously.

The least I could do was give him a straight and honest expectation,

so I walked him through my understanding of Colin's question in our minds, that made the great huntsman tremble nervously.

"I'm not going to lie and say there aren't risks. You can say no. I would be forever grateful if you said yes. You know I will do everything in my power to protect you," I firmly thought.

Small Cap paused for thought before returning with a shaky agreement on the matter.

"He agreed, but this better not cause harm to him." My hands reluctantly signed an answer to Colin's question.

He patted my head and stood before me with an expression of getting down to business.

"For success, you're to follow my instructions to the T."

Small Cap and I nodded. We waited for the next steps.

He reinforced the enclosing barrier, which further agitated Big Mama Banshee and its children.

He pulled out his fob watch and signed words that I roughly translated to, "I am the Light Grimoire."

The fob watch hovered before him in midair.

His hands clapped three times, moved about in a delicate and graceful dance sequence that opened the fob watch.

Silver light poured out of it with impressions of time running in the air before us.

He signed the words for Ego Port within the light.

His hand movements played with the light's intensity to grant it shape. More strings of words were formed in the air. They were absorbed and caught by his hands with graceful sweeps.

"Place Small Cap on the ground before us," he instructed me.

I relayed the instruction to Small Cap, who obediently complied.

Colin placed the clear quartz crystal shard next to him.

His hands moved with a flourish and ceremonial sweeps around Small Cap and the crystal. The movements drew out the words of light his hands had previously absorbed.

A delicate white aura shone around Small Cap and the crystal.

Colin clapped his hands three times to disperse the words and turn off the light. He snatched the watch and returned it to the pocket.

The aura was still shining around Small Cap.

"The spell is ready to go. Now all that is required is to break the link

between your brother and Big Mama Banshee and reconnect his link to Small Cap," Colin advised us.

He briefed us on the next actions we were to take.

The action plan carried a lot of risk and room for error that could cost not only Small Cap his life but our own, but we had to succeed regardless.

The first task was finding a vantage point on Big Mama Banshee. Once I could get close to Death, understand what created the link in order to break it.

"Ego links are psychological, so has to be negated with psychology," Colin explained.

I frowned. Death hardly held grudges or matters close to his heart, nor was he a person easily rattled. So how could a stranger demon know so much about my brother to bind him to an ego link?

"I don't get it. Death is not one to stew on worries. I'm likely the one to feel more troubled about stuff and the most emotional out of all of us," I commented and pouted at Colin's agreement to the fact.

"That's a reason you're not likely to be bound to an ego link. You're too transparent." Colin chuckled.

I yelped at the sizzling and thumping noises coming from the surrounding barrier.

"How much longer can this barrier hold?" I gulped at the sensation of losing time.

"It depends on how long I can keep my cool?" Colin smirked.

That was the secret behind his magic.

I sighed and decided it was wise to keep my own emotions in order and my head as clear as possible.

"So, we need to negate the psychological issue holding Death captive to the banshee to break the link between them, then re-link him to Small Cap and get the hell out of here," my hands rephrased.

Colin nodded his head. He went into detail of our next, actual, steps we were going to take as soon as he had removed the barrier.

I nodded my head with understanding of his instructions and cocked the two guns in my hands in readiness for action.

"No problems. Let's get this done."

Small Cap climbed back into my belt pouch.

Colin placed the crystal shard next to him then readied his weapons

at his belt for quick retrieval once the barrier was lifted.

He slowly exhaled. Some of his breaths fell short. I noticed he was pressing his left arm closer to his side. Was he injured?

I placed the guns down.

"How deep is your wound?" I frowned, forced his arm aside and lifted back part of his overcoat to look at what he had been, skillfully, holding in.

There was a small gash wound toward the side of his waist, and when I pried apart some of his shirt material to garner a better look, I saw that the skin was pustulating and heavily bruised.

I took a closer look at his face and noticed sweat trailing his skin. His green eyes were slightly weepy. Why hadn't I seen it earlier?

"You can't go out like this!" I scolded.

"Nonsense. How are you going to achieve the impossible without my aid?" His hands gingerly reminded me.

"Then I guess I better do something about this wound."

I stared him hard in the eye. "What did you mean when you said I was a hira?"

Colin swallowed a breath. His hands fumbled through an explanation of how he knew of someone who held similar powers that could heal with a kiss and other certain touches. This hira emitted a signature that magis aware of the scent could detect.

"I can heal this?" I pointed to his wound.

His eyes blinked in response, which I took for a yes.

If that was his sole intention for the earlier kiss, why didn't he say so upfront? Why didn't he heal the first time around?

I released a frustrated sigh and freed the wound from as much material as possible. It was nasty and looking extremely painful.

"Close your eyes and imagine I'm someone else if you like," I whispered as I gently coaxed his head towards mine and kissed him.

The vanilla-citrus aroma toyed with our senses as our kisses deepened and the warmth from our bodies mingled.

My mind was going crazy with an urge of wanting his touches and kisses to other areas of my skin. I felt his strength increasing and mine fading fast.

He wrapped his arms around my waist to keep me steady as he pressed harder and deeper.

Gentle green light embraced our bodies as we delved further into each other. My yearning for his touches were invoking a numbing sensation throughout my body. He stopped when I became limp in his arms.

I felt heady, queasy in the stomach and an acrid taste of iron lingering in my tongue.

"Gaah," I moaned.

Colin held my body to his chest, which had fierce heartbeats pounding against it.

I glanced at his wound and sighed when I saw that it was gone. Only a residual amount of dry blood on his shirt and some parts of his skin remained.

"Good, it's gone," I said and pulled myself away from his embrace.

I re-balanced myself and reassessed the condition of his guns that I picked up. I felt well enough to fight.

Colin rechecked his own body. I could tell by the brightness of his eyes that he was more than raring to go.

"Okay, five minutes at most, you have to contain yourself with your brother." He handed me a talisman paper strip. "The words to call upon protection is 'in his light I seek protection.' Think it as soon as you toss it in the air. I don't need to add that you're best to be next to him at that time."

I nodded with understanding.

His hands moved in a bidea dance that made the barrier around us blast the surrounding spiders into ash.

I felt my wrists ache every time I fired rounds at the second wave of oncoming banshees to make their bodies splatter on the surfaces.

My determination for Hollow Eyed Death propelled me forward. I cleared my way towards his ghostly form lurking near the spot that Colin had identified as the exit early.

I tossed the talisman strip into the air when I was within range, muttering the protection script at the same time.

A shield of clear light enclosed Hollow Eyed Death and me in our own private space. I heard Big Mama Banshee's shrieks (filled with anguish) focus on Colin, who was using his magic and physical power to keep it and its children a bay.

"Famine... Help Me." Hollow Eyed Death's voice called out to me.

His words were empty, as if they were running on a loop.

"It's me Death. It's Famine, I'm here." I carefully called out to him, aware not to touch the bluish white line of light at his back.

Colin had mentioned that the ego link's connecting point was at his heart. To sever the link, I needed to break the holding point on his heart, which was psychological.

What could be so troubling that kept him weak?

My mind wandered back to something Colin had said about me being transparent and not likely to be bound to a link.

So, had Death been wrestling with some trouble on his own for a long time?

"Famine... Help Me." The scripted voice from Hollow Eyed Death called out to me again.

"What's making you worry so much Death that you'd allow these freaks to advantage over you?"

"Famine... Help Me."

I squeezed my eyes closed as I thought back to the moment, I had seen Death in the mirror. His hands were banging and pressing the glass on his side.

"I'm sorry, but this body doesn't yearn for the stoic macho type..." The hiruda's words resurfaced to my mind.

"Doesn't yearn..." I rephrased as my mind persistently lingered on the first image of Death banging and pressing the glass on his side.

His banging fist had made a circular motion near his heart, and his pressing fist only had his middle fingers curled in.

"Why are you sorry? What did you do?" I realized the words he had been saying to me at that time.

"Famine... Help Me." Death answered with the same scripted voice.

I yelped when I saw several small banshees attacking the surrounding barrier. Panic was starting to cloud my mind.

"Death - you have nothing to be sorry for. I'm here! I don't blame you for anything!" I raised my voice, hoping it would reach him.

"Famine... Help Me."

"What'd you yearn for Death to make you feel sorry?" I near shouted, feeling my desperation.

It was no use, he kept staring at me with those hollow black eyes and repeating the same words.

The link to his back wasn't showing signs of weakening. I heard Big Mama Banshee's voice wailing in the distance and moving closer as it realized what I was trying to do.

"Please Death, please." I swallowed tears that streamed down my face. "Help me understand."

He repeated the same words with the same expression.

My grief began to weigh me down at the sense of lost hope I was beginning to see as a reality.

My brother was gone?

No! I won't allow it!

"GODDAMNIT DEATH! Who the hell made you feel sorry?!" I shouted at his ego.

My heart skipped a beat when his voice spoke different words.

"Who... Famine?"

"Yes, Death, it's me. Who made you feel sorry?" I gently asked, feeling a flicker of hope.

"Famine. I saw you and Pesti. I saw you..."

My heart picked up with further hope when I saw the link to his back flicker. I did my best to ignore Big Mama Banshee's approaching shrills and the increased suicidal attacks from the spiders to our barrier.

"Pesti and I," I prompted him.

"You were holding hands, looking up to the aurora borealis in the night sky. Happy, both of you were happy."

Death voiced his last moments at Gat Shiem. His recount began from the moment we had parted ways at the Kuri. On the day, the green, pink and blue aurora borealis illuminated the sky at night.

He had been strolling along the soft sand and pebble stone pathways and had stepped onto the Butsudan Hall's wide verandah, relishing the typical placid floral scent from the wooden floorboards.

The loud argument between War and me had made his eyes roll. So, he went to dispel our spat behind the building.

He returned to the verandah by the time Pesti and I had turned a corner, away from the central courtyard.

The sight of a stranger—in a formal navy-blue business suit and wide brim hat called a Fedora—standing before the building's entrance made him pause with a frown. It had been a while since he'd seen

someone from the outside granted entry into Gat Shiem.

He approached the man and saw Shuso standing next to him.

"Shuso introduced me to Abraham Reiner, who had traveled from a place called Hell's Labyrinth to entrust an artifact he and his men had discovered there."

I gulped nervously when Death mentioned that another man had stepped onto the verandah to stand next to Abraham.

This man wore a dark uniform of a military officer and a black veil with an inner layer shielding his eyes from view. However, the X-patterned scar on the side of his neck near his collarbone was clearly visible beneath the veil's material.

Death was given something of an eccentric dismissal order from Shuso. He politely took his leave, crossed the central courtyard past the long Temizuya water basin area where he entered the moonstone Archive Tower.

He greeted passing monks with cordial bows as he followed a fudge scented trail along shimmering stone corridors to the cataloging room; walked between rows of glass cabinets—shelves stocked with objects of various shapes and colors—that spiraled inwards to a circular center where his obsidian cataloging alter was with tools for alchemy laid out on the surface.

Thoughts of the strange men were pushed aside with an intention of talking to War about it later. Sometime had passed when the droopy-eyes monk, Adams-san, had entered to supervise his work. He was running through his checklist of the shelved objects locked away in the cabinets.

I knew that Death and Adams-san were close because of their archive responsibilities, but I would never have imagined the relationship that they had formed. Instead of supervision, Adams-san had disrupted Death's work to make out with him.

Death sighed, confessing to their affair that began by accident due to a mishap with an artifact. They had been dating for a while.

"The number of times we made love in that place makes me feel ashamed. I couldn't stop. I was addicted to him." He lowered his head. "I'm sure this ghost form is Buddha's punishment for me."

He looked to his ghostly hands held out before him.

"Have you forgotten everything Bulldog taught us? People punish

people, we punish ourselves. Buddha offers a way to enlightenment." I firmly reassured him, prompting him to carry on.

Death continued.

Fortunately, they had finished with their nookie and were doing some actual work at the obsidian alter by the time Shuso had entered the room. He led in Abraham and the black veil man, who was holding an iron box patterned with several wardings and protection symbols from The Sacred Word.

"I was told that the box contained an object called a Denbora Tsazcuth."

Abraham knew of the name because it had those words wrapped around the object when they had accidentally discovered it. Several of his men had suffered ailments or lost their lives to the object whilst they were trying to contain it in the box.

He had further described the tsazcuth object as a glowing white ice cube that had no feeling upon touch and no other markers to the senses aside from its visual aspect, according to some reports. It was an object that existed but didn't as soon as you took your eyes off it.

Shuso had Death open the box and use his empathy power to identify the magic belonging to the object.

"I was a fingertip away from touching that thing when I recoiled my hand."

The pain he had felt from being close to the magical ice cube was beyond excruciating. It had left Death screaming with a madness that had almost claimed his mind as he felt his timeline reeling backwards in his head. The transition of emotions and sensations to his body moved at a rapid pace.

"I was being picked and pulled apart within seconds. Feeling everything; the tearing, bleeding, splintering... you can't imagine how painful that was." Death's voice trembled.

Shuso had closed the iron box and moved Death away from it with apologies.

When Death had regained his composure, he told the men that he suspected the power contained within the cube was that of the fabled Power of Null. A power that could break down any barrier, warp time and matter into a single, destructive force.

It was a Chiorntex (cosmic) power written off as a flight of fancy.

Commonly used as a dodgy excuse for people's substance abuse, mental disorders and obsessive-compulsive natures that couldn't be explained through factual science and known theories.

"I get it. You had stumbled upon the Power of Null. Why would that make you feel bad?"

I felt frustrated and panicky at the time it was taking for Death to get through his story. At the same time, I was aware that he had to say things at his pace. So, I released a few breaths to relax and continued listening.

"We took that thing into the Magenta Vault. Shuso and the men had left once they saw the iron box stowed on a shelf in the vault."

Adams-san and Death had been left alone to lock up the vault as usual.

Death mumbled about how they had made love in front of the vault's entrance before locking up its reinforced iron double doors. He was sent on ahead to the cataloging room to freshen up.

Adams-san had remained behind to lock the way to the Magenta Vault, as per usual procedure.

Death returned to the cataloging room, festering with emotions of guilt, shame and the after effects from the tsazcuth. He wandered out of the Archive Tower seeking air and headed down a path that would take him back to Sangha Hall.

"I felt a sense of peace when I saw you and Pestilence watching the sky with innocent eyes." His ghostly lips twitched with a smile.

His face resumed his desolate expression.

"You had no idea what you were seeing were warning colors of a magical disturbance." Death explained about sensing strong power, neutralizing Gat Shiem's protective barriers.

His fear made him sprint back to the central courtyard, where he saw strange lights flickering in the distance near the Torii. He raced towards it and stopped for breath just short of the archway's steps. There he saw Adams-san with the iron box that they had taken to the Magenta Vault earlier.

The lid of the box was open to release some Power of Null out into the dark open space between the posts.

He opened his mouth to call out to Adams-san then closed it when he saw a countless number of red sashes rushing through the gates,

realizing that they were connected to the waists of black-clad warriors.

He retreated to the Archive Tower, sprinting as fast as he could for the warning bell at the tower's side entrance.

The attacks had started before he was able to sound out the bell.

When he returned to the tower's entrance, he found Adams-san waiting for him with Abraham and a troop of black-clad warriors flanking their rear.

Death was dragged by the hair, by two of the warriors, to the center of the central courtyard and pinned down to the ground by a pair of boots on his back to witness the surrounding devastation.

His heart was breaking with pain, his body was aching from a torrent of emotions running through him.

The panic and pain he felt from the innocent animals affected him the most. He was acutely suffering their infliction, constantly, throughout every part of his body. It was unbearable, he was begging and pleading for them to stop.

"Now watch what your part in the plan has brought about," Adams-san coldly said to Death as he forced him to watch and feel the pain of his monk family being slain by the red sash warriors.

The acrid taste of spilled blood made him regurgitate bile to the ground.

"Remember, it was you who allowed this to happen when your hand reached out for the Power of Null," Adams-san cruelly whispered into Death's aching ears.

"You should have heeded the warning when you let me in between your legs." The dastardly monk landed the killing blow to Death's pride.

Death became unconscious.

I held back the rage I felt for Adams-san, containing my feelings with a deep sigh. Right now, it was about Death, having him realize that he had done nothing wrong.

"Since when have you been a pushover Death? Unbelievable!" I scolded my big brother, whose ghostly form wavered before me.

I noticed the link to his back was also showing an inconsistency.

"Adams-san was your lover, so what?! Since when has love been a crime?" I softened the tone of my voice when I saw the conflicted emotions on his ghostly face.

"Did you ever think of using the Power of Null to destroy our

home?"

"No," Death whimpered.

"What have you got to feel guilty, sorry or ashamed about then?"

"But Shuso, I felt something wasn't right..."

"Stop stubbornly punishing yourself for something you didn't do! Didn't Shuso always tell you to think, 'the right you do is good to others'?" I pressed my argument further.

"Right now, telling my brother he did nothing wrong is the right and good thing to do."

"Famine," Death said with a sensation of swallowing tears.

"Haven't we suffered enough?" I begged him with my own tears flowing out.

Death's ghostly form exhaled a heavy sigh. He faced me with his usual brotherly smile.

My heart raced with relief and hope when the light to Death's back disappeared. His hollow eyes were filled with his usual tender blue, and his countenance showed a more natural skin color.

The ego link was broken.

"Freend, Me glow stronger." Small Cap's voice reminded me of his presence.

I placed the guns to the ground, called him to my shoulder, and held up the glowing crystal shard to the place where Death's heart would be.

A new link was formed between the shard and Death.

"What'd we do now?" I asked, clueless.

Small Cap answered for me when he cradled the shard, making the light intensify into a blinding ray.

I gasped with fright when I saw Death's ego get sucked into the shard, then flow out of it and into Small Cap.

Both Small Cap and the crystal shard stopped glowing. I held his unresponsive body in both my hands.

"Small Cap?" I called out, hoping to hear his voice.

"Freend? Me still here!" Small Cap answered with joy and stood up.

My chest pounded with fear of not hearing my brother's voice.

"Death, please tell me you're also here."

"This is amazing Small Cap. My eyes are seeing a lot of different things. An example is the fuzzy outline of your face Famine." Death's voice perked up in my head.

I could hear the banshee banging against our barrier and caught sight of Colin continuing to hold out against Big Mama Banshee, but his form was looking ragged.

I had taken too long with the ego porting.

"Stay safe in the belt pouch, Small Cap," I said as I placed the crystal back into the pouch with him and readied my guns for action.

I said the spell, Colin had taught me, to reverse the barrier and repel the oncoming banshee attacks.

"Come on, you bastards!" I shouted, letting out some hefty gunfire on the dwindling banshee numbers to re-join the fight.

"You!" Big Mama Banshee bellowed with rage.

It swiped for my head with as many of its spindly legs, intent on decapitating me.

I ducked and dashed around its attacks, firing rounds of bullets in retaliation.

Now that I was back in the fighting arena, Colin had turned his focus on our defenses whilst I continued to tear down Big Mama Banshee with piercing rounds.

"I've never been defied! I'll eat your head!" The banshee wailed.

"Try it blindy." I threw back the insult.

I got a fix on its last set of working eyes, rushed forward firing rounds, and dashed around its rearing form.

My shots struck with critical hits.

The banshee shrilled with pain rather than conceit this time around. It let out choking cries of disbelief.

"How? They said Famine was nothing! NOTHING!" The banshee's legs spasm erratically.

It stumbled, clumsily, about the ground. The bidea bind, Colin had cast around its body, stopped its movements.

Colin stamped out the living chi of the last banshee child in front of Big Mama Banshee.

I coolly approached the recoiling spider.

"Nothing? Everything comes to null, eventually." I fired bullet rounds that stilled it permanently.

The lair assumed a restful silence.

Colin dropped to his knees with exhaustion. He lifted his head with an expression of laughter on his face and flashed me a winner's grin.

I handed back his guns and flashed him a swooping scissors hand gesture near my chest that motivated him to stand towards me.

"Yeah, that makes us two idiots," he signed back and slapped my shoulder.

His guns had returned to their inactive state in his side holsters. He assumed the task of clearing the web gunk that blocked our exit.

About the Four Horsemen of Apocalypse

We were finally able to exit the lair. Our path followed another black wall corridor.

I relished the calm and uneventful experience we had so far. Colin constantly reminded me to stay alert for surprise attacks.

"Hey Famine, about what you did for me back there, I am extremely grateful. I'm very lucky to have you as my baby brother," Death thanked me.

"It's no big deal, Death. We're family. It's what brothers do," I casually palmed off, hoping it hid the embarrassment I felt.

I mean, I had just found out about my brother being something of a sex fiend. It was a surprise and a half.

"Death, yanno, I'm all good about hearing who you love, but I'd rather not hear the sordid details of your romances every again," I grimaced.

Death's laughter rang annoyingly in my head, which had startled Small Cap and caused his body to twitch in the belt pouch.

"Death, have consideration for Small Cap!" I scolded him aloud.

I frowned at the weird look Colin gave me. "You try and cope with my big brother's kooky voice in your head!"

"Commiserations," he sarcastically answered back with a chuckle.

I groaned, attempting to keep my thoughts to myself as best I could. It was extremely difficult when my brother voiced his interest in every detail of the corridor we walked through.

"Aah, the corridor is made of obsidian. Fascinating. I can detect a type of transmap force magic from the walls..."

I rolled my eyes at his voice harping on about force magic this and force magic that.

"Sheesh, Death, didn't I tell you to have consideration for Small Cap," I grumbled.

"Me don't mind Freend. It be nice voice." Small Cap was being a polite host.

"Geeze Small Cap, you're too kind," I said.

Colin stopped us at a T-junction and pointed to a direction of where I should be standing. I took up the spot. He stood in front of me.

I heard Death's voice gasp with awe when the T-Junction unraveled, going from the outside to the center of where we stood.

The bricks reformed into a new, L-shape, corridor before us.

We traveled down the new corridor and then into another that had taken shape. The way before us was looking uneventful.

My thoughts went to Leinard who I hoped was okay. I was concerned that the hiruda had placed him in a banshee lair as well.

Although Leinard was a skilled and capable magis, I doubt he'd be able to fight off a clutter of redback spiders on his own. The thought of it made me tense with worry.

"So, who is this Leinard person I'm getting a strong mental image from your thoughts?" Death surprised me.

"Leinard?" I gulped, saying his name made me feel flustered.

"Yes, I'm seeing a stoic man from your thoughts. An officer by the looks; tall, extremely handsome with intelligent gray eyes." Death added with a sober tone.

"Ugh! That's invasion of privacy, Death!" I shouted, glad that Colin couldn't hear my voice.

I was hoping he couldn't intrude further into my memories.

"Famine! You and that man kissed?!" Death gasped.

He began lecturing me on how wanton pleasures led to sin and that was the path to trouble.

"Death! Stay out of my private thoughts!" I shouted again, which had caught Colin's attention this time.

I waved off his questions and growled at his smirking face.

"Did you not learn anything from my experiences?! I succumbed to lust and look what it caused! Learn from my example..." Death continued, his scolding turned into another lecture.

"Since we have time, I think it's appropriate to have a proper and serious conversation about sex that you would not have garnered from Bulldog's gravure books. You need to understand the consequences and risks of..."

"Ugh! Spare me the lectures," I groaned, meeting Colin's eyes. They held an expression of laughter.

"You're the Light Grimoire, don't you have a spell for silencing voices or inner thoughts?!" I begged him with pleading hands.

"Why? What's your brother on about?" His hands were twitching from his chuckling.

"He's, um, well." I fumbled and fidgeted on the spot and averted his eyes as I signed. "He's lecturing me on sex, 'cause I kind of kissed a guy... or two."

"Two?!" Death's voice roared in my head, which made Small Cap yelp.

I cupped my hands over my ears and mumbled flower names, cat breeds, and anything that could distract my brother from this train of thought.

Colin's body doubled over with laughter; tears were squeezed out of his eyes.

"Does your brother know sign language?" he asked once he had calmed down.

I nodded.

He tapped on my belt pouch to call out Small Cap, who raised his head before him.

"Rest assure that your little brother's chastity is still in order." He signed his reassurance to Death.

"This man seems suspicious, who is he?" Death inquired.

I was glad for the change of conversation, so I formally introduced Colin to Death by proxy of Small Cap.

"Very shifty. I know that we need him to find our way but try not to make any unnecessary physical contact with him, Famine." Death warned me.

"My brother is saying thank you for saving our lives back there. He is extremely grateful." I lied with a smile.

Colin nodded his head and resumed his lead down the corridor.

Our uneventful experience ended up being too good to be true when we turned into a new corridor and found ourselves in a vast red-black cavern with guns and arrows pointed at our heads from a group of people surrounding us.

I noticed that they weren't wearing the Evadale Knight garb but regular clothes as myself and fitted with firepower. The stench of iron, magnesium and some other firecracker concoction wafting through the cavern made it more obvious.

"Well, what do we have here?" I heard a pompous voice of a man question our presence.

An old man with a potbelly bulging out of his opened dark jacket stepped into view. A dark homburg hat was set low on his head. I spied the top of a fob watch being pushed out of the silt pocket of his dark navy vest.

I stifled a chuckle at the sight of his pudgy face that held the most ridiculous dark mustache, purposely styled and tapered, so its pointy tips curled up towards his piggy cheeks.

The fine silver monocle eyeglass, adorning his left brown eye, didn't help his taste credibility either.

His heavy, clunky, steps made his patterned broad toe shoes an obvious feature.

"My, oh, my, a pair of Adonis, one of them a knight too; oh, lucky days!" The pudgy man creepily licked his lips and childishly clapped his hands.

"Boys and girls, take whatever you can glean from the knight, do what you like with him, but that black-eye cutie pie is not to be touched. I will have that pleasure."

"Eek! What's with this creepy guy?" I shivered with the creeps running through my spine that were ten times worse than the ones Trix gave me.

"Hold Homburg!" A firm voice gave an order that caused the pudgy man's mustache to twitch with a snarl.

My eyes widened with surprise when I saw Leinard coolly striding towards me but wearing a different outfit.

The manly opaque Gus hat on his head, shadowed his gray eyes and pushed out some of his brown fringe, so it hung over the tops of his brows.

His navy-blue officer's uniform was replaced with a long-sleeved tanned workman's shirt, dark gentleman's vest, hardy dark denim jeans and brown dragon pattern riding boots. A dark gray handkerchief scarf covered his neck and the collar's spread area.

My eyes lingered on the tanned double belt that held up his jeans by the waist and provided support for two tarnished silver-iron guns poking out of their hip holsters, which were in close range of his steady gloved hands.

"Colonel?" I blurted and gulped.

"I resemble someone you know?" The man stoically asked, after his eyes had looked me up and down with a quick assessment.

I braved a glance at Colin and was relieved he had kept a level expression, but I'm sure even he was surprised and confused by the man's striking resemblance.

"Who are you men?" The man asked us.

"Oh, just some nobodies passing through," I timidly answered, ignoring Colin's raised brow.

"Nobodies are ones who do not pass through the North Wing of the First Tier," a feminine voice berated my answer.

I held back a reaction to the woman who stepped into view to stand next to the Leinard look-a-like.

Her long blond hair was presented in a neat bun, held together by hairpins that had dainty bird charms dangling from delicate silver chains.

Her features were small, and the shape of her face was oval. The blue of her eyes and the shape of her mouth were unremarkable. Her curvaceous body was donned in a black hakama, kimono and boots; a sheathed koto sword was strapped near her hip.

She was cooling herself with a folding fan made of old gold material; the fan's guard ends showed an oriental image of sparrows.

I yelped with fright at the guns and arrows that were cocked and ready to shoot out our heads.

"Last chance. Tell us who you are, or see your end." The Leinard look-a-like was straight to the point.

"Fine," I released a weary sigh. "My name is Famine, and he's Colin."

"Famine? I've heard that name before," The Leinard look-a-like said with a pensive frown.

"Aah! To hell with these brutes. I say, let us do away with them and salvage their gear," grumbled Homburg, the man with the tacky mustache.

"What are your orders, Sire?" the woman asked the Leinard look-a-like.

"Bind their eyes and hands and bring them. If anyone defiles or handles these men poorly, I'll cut off your hands for my ornaments," the Leinard look-a-like casually ordered the people who pointed the

weapons to our heads.

I glanced around their faces and noticed their fearful or tense expressions. It seems this man was able to intimidate them.

"Sire, these men could be spies from your brother! It would be better to eliminate them before they cause further harm." Homburg voiced his difference on the order and swallowed nervous gulps at the piercing frown from the Leinard look-a-like.

"Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you," he conceded.

My eyes and hands were bound before I had a moment to react.

A pungent scent, of what I gathered was jasmine and almond, wafted up my nose to cause all my senses to dull to a point that I couldn't detect anything.

I could tell I was moving, but I couldn't feel my movements nor sense distance and time. There were no smells or other markers that could tell me where I was going. I felt like I was walking a formless dream.

"De—" I tried to think, but even my thoughts were jumbling up and incoherent as soon as I tried to string words or an image together. All my mental images eventuated to black and white blobs.

If I was able to feel my heart beats, I suspected they would be racing with panic right about now.

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"I'm mighty annoyed with you, Colonel!" I pouted.

Leinard and I were chatting in the Library Room's main sitting area, which we had to ourselves.

My thoughts had wandered back to a memory of when Small Cap was being hunted around a lab bench by a mad doctor, and Leinard had stopped me from going to my spider friend's aid.

"What do you mean?" Leinard innocently asked.

"You held my arms back when I tried to save Small Cap from that Mad Doctor Mercer." I continued to pout.

I sidled up next to him on the two-person love seat.

"Oh, that time." Leinard remembered.

His nonchalant response further ticked me off that I felt I had to apply some revenge on him.

"I'm absolutely annoyed." I leaned in and kissed him, wrapping my arms around his waist, so he couldn't escape from me.

He relaxed into my arms, reeling me closer to suckle my neck. His

hands stealthily undid my outfit; their feathered touches were making me swoon.

"Revenge? You're ten years too early to try this on me." His whispered voice heated my ears.

His mouth continued his sensual retaliation on other parts of my exposed skin, his fingers toyed with the buttons of my blouse and a hand was... whacking me?!

Whack!

"Yeek!" My voice involuntarily yelped from the throbbing pain I felt to my head.

I groggily pushed myself up to a sitting position, nursing my bump.

"Finally decided to wake," huffed a woman's voice.

Flickers of blue light danced about my eyes. I glanced down and noticed the squiggly silver veins on the snow-white marble floor I sat on.

When I raised my head, I saw that the source of the blue light was from glistening kyanite gravel speckled throughout blue ink walls of a modest-sized room that was empty of furniture and other tell-tale signs of being lived in.

I glanced about for Colin and saw him sitting near me with his back to the wall and legs stretched out like he was a propped-up rag doll. His mouth was parted with a spaced-out smirk. The green of his eyes glistened dreamily, and his pupils were dilated. Was he drugged?

"A safeguard that he won't surprise us with magic," said the voice.

"So, you keep drugging him?!" I glared at the expressionless face of the blond woman before me.

Although she was physically alike to Ryoko, the comparison would be an insult, since Ryoko wouldn't keep a man down with drugs.

"I haven't drugged him," the woman answered back. "The kyanite in the walls sedates those with high mana. Those sorts of magis continue to find themselves in a happy place in their minds when resting in this room."

"Happy place?" I frowned. Her explanation was further alarming.

The woman chuckled with a knowing look in her eyes.

"Wasn't your happy place with this Leinard person whom you were moaning about in your sleep?"

"WHAT?!" I blurted, feeling my cheeks burning with a deep blush. "I would never!"

"Teehee, you just did. Letting out those sultry moans as if you were being held," the woman laughed and teased me further.

"Please stop!" I grimaced.

I mean, my brother was in the belt pouch and earshot away. Brother? I suddenly remembered about Small Cap and Death and hoped that they hadn't been discovered.

"That's enough Lyra."

My body froze at the sound of Leinard's voice. I came to realize that it couldn't be him.

I saw the Leinard look-a-like standing near a scotomatous door, made obvious by his presence before it. I suspected this man and this happy room were the reasons for my earlier weird dream that I was keen to push aside and pretend it never came to my mind.

"Bring them both to the Office of Exacles. I want to have a talk with them in private," he ordered the woman called Lyra.

"By your command, Sire," Lyra respectfully acknowledged his orders with a bow.

He exited the room, leaving the door open, so we'd be able to follow him out.

"Okay, you, time to snap out of it." She waved a vial of smelling salts under Colin's nose and sat back when his body jerked about as his mind wandered back into reality.

"You are okay," I mouthed to Colin, so he could read my lips well enough. He reassured me with a nod.

"He can't speak?" Lyra asked as she met Colin's glaring eyes.

"Not like you and me," I answered back.

"Chet," she grumbled under her breath and ordered us to stand up.

I allowed Colin to use my shoulder as a prop as we clumsily rose to our feet.

Lyra let out an ear-piercing catcall that caused the ground to tremor from the approaching heavy footsteps.

I gasped at the sight of the bull-man stomping his way into the room.

He was at least two meters tall with a beefed body of hardy muscle, which he had no shame in being topless, showing off his chest area and a healthy dark tan to his skin. Fortunately, his bottom area was contained within dark denim jeans and black rider boots. His head was one hundred percent a bull, even with the ivory curved horns poking up

from the top of his head near his round ears.

Cute tufts of black hair hung over his matching colored eyes. A solid, gold, ring was looped through the nostrils of his snout and his mouth was set with a mild manner expression.

"Yah called milady?" His baritone voice politely addressed Lyra.

"Adorable!" I accidentally blurted to the bull-man, followed with a muttered apology.

The bull-man gave me a funny look. His laughter roared around the room.

"Kid's calling meh adorable," he continued to laugh.

"Buru, that's enough!" Lyra scolded.

She gave the bull-man's shoulder a light slap with her folded fan, which quietened his laughter.

He listened obediently to her orders, which were for his assistance in manhandling us out of the room for the Office of Exacles.

Buru's clunky hands (that were like any other human) rechecked the tightness of the silver binds around our wrists with hard yanks.

He coaxed us into a walk with a firm kick to our backsides and kept to our rear flanks as we followed Lyra out of the happy room.

My mind was struggling to keep up with the milky crystal corridors that shimmered with a pinkish white light as we walked.

At first, I thought that the walls were moonstone, but I soon realized they held a smoother and more translucent texture.

"Fascinating. This is the first time I've walked through a corridor made from milk tourmaline. The semblance magic imbued within the walls causes the stone to cast those delicious watermelon streaks to give you that walking on a cloud feeling," Death said in my mind that almost made me blurt out with a strange reaction.

"Why have you been silent, Death?!" I curtly thought whilst hiding my relief.

I was conscious of not drawing unnecessary attention from Lyra and Buru.

"We were staying low until I knew that we were safe to talk. Besides, Small Cap's body needs a lot of daytime rest. Fortunately, you weren't body searched or had your belt taken off you."

"Isn't mind speaking secure enough?" I frowned.

"Not with you. Your mind is like an open tent with a welcome sign.

I'll need to teach you the skill of mind shielding once I've returned to my body," he lectured me.

"For now, I'm acting as your shield, but it won't block anyone who is a semblance master pertaining to telepathy."

My thoughts naturally returned to that weird dream with Leinard with hopes Death hadn't seen it.

"I did and that is another matter for discussion, once this whole thing is behind us," Death sternly confirmed that made me cringe.

I felt like I wanted to find a nice hole to crawl into and lie low for a while.

"Me find good bark Freend can hide behind." Small Cap chipped in with his version of a consoling pat on the back.

"Thank you, Small Cap, I won't need the bark, but I appreciate the gesture. You're a great friend," I reassured my spider friend and felt a rush of good cheer from his mind.

Colin and I continued to follow Lyra's lead in silence. I could tell by his eyes that he was carefully considering the situation and possibly for the moment we would be able to break for an escape.

Right now, we had no idea of our surroundings, so it was best to play safe for the time being.

I was also curious about the person who was a splitting image of Leinard. Did Leinard and Trix have an older brother that I didn't know about? I was sure I would learn soon enough.

The tourmaline corridors finally ended at a destination. I blinked with surprise at the sight before me.

Office? You've got to be kidding me.

The Office of Exacles was a weird pentagon shaped chapel that was five times bigger than the Butsudan.

Milky tourmaline walls provided a backdrop to silver statues of winged snakes (baring their fangs) at each corner of the room.

I glanced to my feet and saw a sharp pointed star drawn (with tourmaline) across the entire silver floor area; each point of the star ended at one of the snake statues.

Leinard look-a-like was waiting for us at the center, before moonstone steps that led up to a wide dais where four statues of armed men on rearing horses were displayed.

I gasped with awe when I saw letters of silver light animated across

the surface of the statues.

"The statues are made of bluestone. A lot of semblance magis use this stone for tapping into Chiorntex energies. I'm not surprised that residual magic will linger on these statues if they were used for divination purposes." Death's voice intruded on my thoughts.

"Thank you, Buru and Lyra. Please wait outside." Leinard look-a-like ordered.

"Sire! They could be dangerous. At least let us wait by the door."

I was surprised by Lyra's complaint.

"Lyra."

I blinked with more surprise at the nervous gulping movements her slender throat made.

"As you wish, Sire." She bowed and stepped out of the room with Buru.

The room fell silent upon the closure of the double iron doors that had been out of view until now.

"Follow," he stoically ordered us.

Colin and I exchanged a look of caution as we followed the man up the steps to the dais.

"Famine." I flinched at my name being spoken aloud and reverberating around the room.

I met the Leinard look-a-like's unreadable gray eyes.

"Why are you here?" His voice was expressionless.

"Well, yanno, not like it was in my holiday plan." I fumbled nervously and swallowed another nervous breath.

I felt my heart racing as I waited in silence for his response.

"Hang in there, Baby Brother. Try to think of him as just another man." Death's pep talk wasn't doing me any favors.

"Men are dangerous Death. Surely you of all people should know that." I answered back.

"Of course I do. I can sense potential dangers from this man. Especially since he wears the same face of the man you love. Right now, he's just a man who wants to talk to you. Go with that."

I was not able to stop the deep blush that surfaced to my cheeks at Death's assumption. What was he saying? I loved Leinard? No way!

"You can fool yourself Baby Brother but not me. You're too transparent."

"You okay there, Famine?" Leinard look-a-like asked with a raised brow.

"It's not fair that you know my name, but I don't know yours. Even a prisoner has the right to know the name of his guard, right? For last meal requests and what not," I nervously rambled that made Colin tense.

We flinched at the hearty laughter rebounding off the walls from the Leinard look-a-like.

"Okay. I'll grant you this boon. However, once I give you this, you are to pick one of two choices."

I felt like groaning at the déjà vu.

"Guess we don't have much choice." I reluctantly nodded.

"I'm Brystagg De Marc Aueralius."

My heart skipped a beat. So, he was related to Trix and Leinard. If that were the case, why was he a prisoner at Hell's Labyrinth? Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest to Trix and Leinard's positions? The more I thought on the matter, it opened to a book load of questions.

"Hey Death, can you work out what's going on?" I thought, hoping he would be able to shed some light.

"No. We best learn a bit more of whom this Brystagg is. Although, from what I've gathered from Lyra and Buru's reactions and the fact that they call him Sire gives me cause to think he belongs to royalty and of a high position," Death explained.

I glanced at Colin from the corner of my eye and was impressed by his calm expression.

"You're a very calm person, aren't you?" Brystagg addressed Colin with his question.

"He can't speak like you and me," I answered for Colin, which stirred a pensive reaction from Brystagg.

"Mute?" He directed his question to Colin, who confirmed with a nod.

"What?! You could hear me the whole time!" I blurted.

Brystagg's laughter echoed about the room.

"Famine, learn to hold back those impulses of yours, will you! You're making me nervous!" Death scolded me.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"You're a laugh," Brystagg said after he had calmed down. "I take it you can communicate with this knight at some level."

I nodded my head and whimpered when Brystagg revealed a dagger that was hidden in his boot. He went behind my back and freed my hands from the binds that hand contained them. I rubbed my aching wrists and glanced at the man with surprise.

"W-Why did you free my hands?" I was afraid now.

"Good will," Brystagg answered, which didn't allay my fears.

He drew our attention to the statues before us, focusing on the hooded one in the center.

Silver light illuminated an image of a robed magis with his gauntlet hands pulling hard on the reins of the rearing steed, with hollow eyes and a snout twisted with an evil snarl.

I felt like fainting at the animated letters the silver light moved around the statue's bluestone surface.

"F – A – M – I – N – E," I spoke aloud.

"Yes, the name I remembered seeing on this statue," Brystagg confirmed.

He made us look at the other statues. On the far right, Death was portrayed as an image of a sinister figure fully clad in heavy armor, one gauntlet hand held a scythe and the other tugged the rein of his steed. War's armor had horns on the helmet and at the joints, his rearing horse had a nasty snarl that looked ready to mangle heads. On the far right was the name of Pestilence, whose image was simple; a robed man with an arrow nocked in a longbow posed for release. Like my statue, his face was hidden behind a hood.

"Pesti," I whispered with longing.

"The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse who carry the Hana of our World." Brystagg's voice held both reverence and a tang of bitterness.

I frowned. Where was he getting this information? Did he have a copy of the ratty book War had found in the Archive Tower dungeons?

"What book was this?" Death's voice butted in, which I ignored.

"What is that?" I gulped down my question.

Brystagg peered at me for some time as he weighed up his next words.

"A prophecy of a dark kind. The books I have read from this place stipulate a prophecy that will bring about the end of times."

His voice became sober.

"If the Four Hana breaks in the Age of Apocalypse, Sol will face a

threat of annihilation at the hands of four gods known only as the Zaldizko. This term translates to the horsemen. Roughly, the Four Horsemen of Apocalypse."

"Ha, ha, right, like that's going to happen." I fumbled nervously.

Brystagg changed the subject. "So, about the choices."

It was obvious Colin and I would pick choice number two, which saw us become part of Brystagg's gang under the watchful eyes of Lyra and Buru.

We'd be able to learn more of where we were and about these people whom we had to play nice with.

He called Lyra and Buru back into the room when our choice had been confirmed and left us to their care.

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We may have accepted the condition of being part of Brystagg's Honorable Thieves (a name the people in the group had penned themselves. They had even shortened this to BHT) but this didn't mean we were free to do as we pleased. Far from it.

We slaved away within a zirconia mine pocket that the BHT had discovered when they had been incarcerated within Hell's Labyrinth.

The group members chipped away with intense focus and will. It seemed everyone had a strong purpose for working the mines, but no one discussed on what their purpose was.

The facts that I was able to learn (mostly from accidental eavesdropping) were about the people of the group who were petty thieves and fraudsters.

Aside from Brystagg and Lyra, everyone was unskilled or unable to use magic and from poor backgrounds; hardly the type that required maximum security incarceration. Only one man amongst them had been legally convicted with a serious crime – Brystagg.

"He be a scary man but keeps us safe," said Amos, who worked the same vein as I did.

In the time I had been working the mines, we had assumed a cautious friendship.

Amos Dillen was the youngest person of BHT at the age of thirteen. He was as dangerous as a butterfly. I was impressed that he had somehow

managed to escape Hombug's twisted attention. I suspected his common features with freckly cheeks, simple brown eyes and hair that was cropped short around his small ears, wasn't tacky mustache's type.

Death held the boy with high suspicion, but he understood that I needed to be onside with someone who could help us with information. Amos was the type who talked or seemed to want to talk. So he was the best person to stay close to for the time being.

"Is he someone high up?" I asked Amos.

He paused his chipping and stared at my face with jaw dropping disbelief.

"Seriously? What part of Sol have you been living in?" he said and wiped aside a part of his wispy fringe from his fine brows.

"Haha, well, I've been isolated in a monastery all my life. Dunno much about things in other places of the world." I awkwardly scratched at my head.

"Oh, an orphan, that would make sense." Amos's expression had calmed.

I guess wearing similar outfits (minus the bow tie) and both of us having weathered boots with heavy scuff marks had made him assume that theory. Luckily.

"I don't understand much of the gossip, but I've heard that Sire was charged with treason when he fought his brother for the throne." Amos continued with his earlier conversation.

As Death had guessed, Brystagg was from royalty. He wasn't any small-time lord or prince but an apparent heir to the High King of Sol.

He had an older half-brother named Sirius, who was born on the same day as himself but four hours earlier. So, although they had different mothers, they were raised together and formed a twin type of relationship. Rumors had it that they were inseparable until they had reached the age of consent at fifteen.

Their brotherhood began to unravel due to their differences of opinion about how the country should be ruled. Brystagg was focused on bringing in democracy and equality amongst the classes. This clashed with his Sirius's ideals on upholding autocracy, which favored the wealthy.

"Sire was the voice of us poor and forsaken folk." Amos expanded on his, surprisingly, insightful opinions for a boy his age.

Brystagg had more of a rightful claim to the throne, since his mother was the apparent heir for Caldera; a province that held a lot of political sway within Armia. Whereas, Sirius's mother was a distant cousin to a man who was third-in-line to be a Baron.

No one would have conspired against Brystagg if he had upheld royal traditions. Because of his radical views, many wealthy dukes and lords had voiced support and backing to Sirius's claim to the throne.

So, when the princes' father had passed away during a minor treaty battle between the Armia and Tempra, the kingdom fell into a two-year civil contention.

The contention ended when an influential group of Brystagg's supporters were caught and publicly executed. The common masses couldn't compete against the supreme firepower, magic and financial sway from the aristocrats. Brystagg's supporters were soon rounded up and either forced to fealty to Prince Sirius, imprisoned or executed.

A coronation was held shortly afterward to cement Sirius's right as High King. His first order, under the advice of their uncle, was to sentence his own brother for high treason and mass murder.

"Wow, that's brutal." I let out a deep breath.

"Isn't it?" Amos sighed as he rested his pickaxe again to wipe off more of the sweat from his brow.

His face tensed into an expression of fear when he caught sight of Brystagg staring back at him with his arms crossed.

"Gossiping again instead of working, Amos?" Brystagg's icy voice stirred shivers down my spine.

"N-No S-Sire. Just bringing the newbie up to speed." Amos gulped.

I flinched when Brystagg's eyes turned my way.

"Did you get all that?"

I abruptly nodded, that caused a head rush.

"Come with me, Famine and bring Colin."

I didn't hesitate to hurry to the opposite end of where Colin picked stone and signed for him to follow me. Colin saw Brystagg and stopped his chipping.

∞

Our uneventful experience ended up being too good to be true when we turned into a new corridor and found ourselves in a vast red-black cavern with guns and arrows pointed at our heads from a group of

people surrounding us—

"Hey Colin, is it me, or have we gone through this situation already," I whispered to the knight next to me.

He replied with a firm nod.

We continued with the replayed course of events (as they had originally happened) until we found ourselves waking up in the kyanite happy room.

"Easy Lyra, I don't have much brains, but I do value what I have," I moaned from the hard whack she had given the back of my head to rouse me out of my unconscious state.

She sat back with a knowing sigh.

"Cursed time cell. Looks like we haven't chipped away enough of the zirconia," she groaned.

"Time cell? Zirconia?" I tipped my head to one side.

"The zirconia allows the power of preservation to occur around us, so we relive the moment from when we each entered into this time cell," Brystagg answered as he stood in the room's entrance with his arms folded.

"Aah, I understand the mining of the zirconia now," Death's voice piped up in my head.

"Understand?" I rapidly blinked, still uncertain.

"Zirconia is used for a lot of time bound magic."

Death explained that this form of magic came from a source known as the Power of Preservation. Zirconia could hold memories, records of events as they happened and keeping time fixed to one point.

"Isn't the time fixed to one place thing dangerous?" I frowned.

"Yes and no. Say you're playing a record on a gramophone and the needle runs over an unintended and deep scratch. What do you think the needle will do?" Death quizzed me. By the sounds of his voice, he was enjoying the chance to show off his knowledge.

"Um, I guess the needle would move off to one side." I gave an obvious answer.

"Correct. However, if the scratch across the record's intended groove is ever so slight but deep, the needle continuously hops off and on in the same spot with attempts to reset itself. However, the record keeps spinning its intended course." Oddly, I was able to understand this explanation.

"So, if I understand right. This time cell is a slight groove, and they are chipping away the zirconia to make a big scratch, so the needle will be knocked off to one side when it runs over it." I rephrased what I hoped was a correct understanding.

"Bingo. That needle is the time magic imbued within the zirconia. Chip away a lot of the stone; it may be enough to create a big scratch for time to be reset back to a zero point of origin."

The penny dropped.

"They can free themselves from the cell?!"

"I suspect it's a done deal now that they have a knight with a maplink." Death sighed.

"Back to the Lotus Bridge." I gulped.

Colin was in much more danger than I was, being BHT's ticket out of the cell once they had reached that point of origin. If they ever found out about him being the Light Grimoire, I shudder to think what they would force from him.

"Bring them Lyra." Brystagg left the room.

We made our way back to the Office of Exacles, but it was a different conversation this time.

"Lyra." Brystagg said.

Buru and Lyra closed the doors.

City of Minos

Everyone followed Brystagg to the top of the dais and stood before the statue bearing my name.

I let out a goofy grin. I mean, come on, the statue was a statement of godly cool. There was no way I would not feel both conceited and humbled.

"Something you want to share with us?" Lyra asked with a raised brow.

"Oh, um, well. Someone must've thought Famine was cool when they made this, right?" I said as I patted the namesake statue, feeling noteworthy.

"I doubt it." She blatantly shot me down.

"Brutal!" I sulked.

My stomach let out a nasty growl that echoed around the room; I hugged my noisy stomach.

"I haven't eaten since whenever," I groaned.

Buru surprised me when he stepped before me, holding out a bundle of cheese cloth he had pulled out of his pocket.

I soon realized it was enclosing a piece of heaven. Tears of joy spilled from my eyes when I recognized the savory bliss of fried tofu.

"Here yah go." He handed over the blessed morsel.

I gingerly untied the cheese cloth and imagined stars twinkling around the untouched piece of ganmodoki.

"Buddha, bless this beautiful being!" I beamed and devoured the morsel with grateful bites.

"Thank you for the food!" I licked my lips with heartfelt gratitude and bowed at the end.

"The kid's got manners," Buru chuckled as he took back his cheese cloth.

I relished the warm pats his generous hand gave my head, and thought I saw Brystagg's mouth twitch with a smile.

"Done?" Lyra scowled.

I nodded, feeling satisfied enough to take on the world.

Lyra unfolded her old gold fan with a sigh and assumed a moment of focus. She held the fan before her mouth and muttered a passage from The Sacred Word.

My eyes widen with awe. The sparrows on her fan guards came to life. Their dainty gold bodies flew in formations around the room; changing course whenever Lyra swept her fan, back and forth, with elegant movements. Their tail feathers trailed a generous stream of gold dust to shower the room with starlight.

I flinched and clung to Colin's side when the star pattern on the floor ignited with white fire and caused the eyes of the snake statues to burn white. The statues became animated and moved about their pedestals to create a figure eight shape.

"Yip!" I yelped when I felt my butt cheek sore from a firm pinch.

I pushed Colin off me and met his blameless expression with a snarl.

"Famine, pay attention!" Death shouted.

I shook off the ringing effects from my ears and did as he had instructed. I saw that the stardust had called images to every part of the tourmaline walls.

The sparrows flew into one of the walls. We found ourselves trailing the sparrows' flight through a maze of a sparkling gold city without moving off the dais.

"Ooh!" I gasped at the wonder of gold and tourmaline paved streets crowded with other bull-men and women going about their business.

The sparrows' flight moved us further along the streets, past square gold brick buildings that sparkled magnificently. Grand white marble and silver lined, ribbed, columns stood as tall sentries along the street corners. I gazed up to an aqua blue and white streaked sky. How something so wondrous could exist underground was beyond my comprehension.

Lyra swept her fan back and forth, so the sparrows led us towards an enormous gold building standing in the middle of a mosaic center at the heart of the maze city.

The sparrows flew circles around the building's triangular roof that was supported by evenly spaced white marble-silver columns. Our direction moved towards a domed archway entrance at the start of a square courtyard, which was illuminated by burning kettle drums

forming rows on either side of the grounds.

Our travels ended at the entrance's threshold. Lyra muttered a passage of The Sacred Word to recall the sparrows back to her fan and their dormant state within the fan guards.

I breathed in musky odors, and a powerful aroma of iron, sandalwood and sage lingering among the milling bull-people donned in fine robes of white or of a commoner's attire. They walked about their own busy around the courtyard near the building directly opposite the archway, and up and down shining gold steps, which led onto the building's wide glittering porch and the double entrance beyond.

I glanced up to the high eaves and fascia of the building, and read strange hieroglyphs moving about the wide fascia.

"Here lies the Temple of Mithras, City of Minos." Death translated for me.

"Mithras? Minos?" I whispered.

"Minos be meh home city forged within the labyrinth," Buru answered for me. "Mithras be our divine god."

I noticed expressions of sadness and longing in his eyes.

"Is something wrong, Buru?" I asked and gently gripped his arm.

"Nay. Just been long time since meh seen home." Buru sighed.

"Thank you for your directions, Buru. We'll take our leave now." Brystagg said and gestured for me to follow his lead.

I turned to Buru with questions. "You're not coming?"

"He can't." Brystagg answered for him. "He was exiled."

"Exiled?" I found it hard to believe that good-natured Buru would face a crime that would forbid him entry into his home city.

"It be okay, Famine. It be meh fate." Buru kindly reassured me.

"Don't stray from Sire's side. Meh not be like other minotaurs who dine on flesh of man," he warned me.

"May the gods shine favorably on yah." He sent me off with a pat to my back for safe journeys. "Meh be waiting for yah here."

"Make sure you do not leave my side," Brystagg whispered to me.

He hadn't needed to tell me twice.

The carnivorous stares we received from the minotaurs we moved past made me tremble with a fear of being shish kebabs.

"Oi!" A burly minotaur grumbled when I accidentally bumped his

arm. His expression of annoyance had instantly changed to one of glee.

I'm sure he thought it was his lucky day, bumping into a piece of walking high grade meat.

"O-Oh, s-sorry kind Sir," I whimpered and clung, closer, to Brystagg's side.

"Don't walk away, pretty boy," gruffed the burly minotaur.

I flinched when I saw his thick tongue lick his chops

"Keep walking," Brystagg ordered me.

I nodded and continued with my eyes fixed on the double doors beyond the porch. I braved a glance over my shoulder and hurried my steps when I saw a hungry procession trail behind us. My heart raced at the same speed of my walk, which became a light jog up the steps. We found our way to the double door entrance blocked by a mob of common minotaurs.

"Dem look tasty," said a salivating minotaur.

"Yeek, their friendliness is a lot different to Buru's." I hid behind Brystagg's back as the crowd closed around us.

"LEAVE THEM BE OR BECOME NULL!" Boomed an omnipotent voice from within the temple building.

The temple grounds roared and trembled with voices bellowing out with pain. The minotaurs instantly dispersed and scattered, holding onto their horns or cupping their ears. Our way to the gold double doors was clear.

"Well," I let out my relief and dusted off my hands.

My attention was drawn to a white robed minotaur standing at the threshold of the double door entrance.

His whole image was a feeling of wisdom and a peaceful age, gray fur was flecked with the odd strand of youthful brown and deep-set brown eyes seemed to be smiling with a friendly expression. He had his hands out with a gesture of welcome.

"Galais. You have my gratitude, old friend." Brystagg respectfully and warmly greeted the minotaur with a firm pat to his shoulder.

"I am grateful you heeded Our Lady's call, Prince Brystagg."

I felt calmed by the elderly minotaur's soothing, deep voice. I'm sure the burning incense at the small homage shrines at either end of the porch was partially to blame.

"She has been expecting you, Lord Famine." The elderly minotaur

directed his words to me with a respectful bow and prompted us to follow him inside.

I gawked at the gold and silver statues of snakes or minotaurs of old that I passed. Each one showed majestic forms of either caught within a moment of battle. As I peered lower toward the nameplate of the statues' pedestals, I noticed humans were depicted as teeny tiny fillers littering these creatures' feet.

"I take it that humanity is not number one here." I carefully whispered.

"Majority of the minotaur race see us as cattle. Only a minority view us as other intelligent beings." Lyra answered for me.

"You think?" My eyes darted about the various statues to confirm that fact.

I returned my focus to Brystagg's lead and our way up steep marble steps.

"Oh!" I let out sounds of awe at the stained-glass domed roof high above our heads. I hadn't noticed it when we were trailing the sparrows' flight.

Outside light seeped into the temple through the roof's colored glass and streamed gentle rays over our bodies as we crossed a circular floor depicting a lotus in full bloom on a dark watery surface. I marveled at the water ripples my footsteps created every step I took across the lotus floor like I was walking across the surface of a pond.

"Fascinating. The floor is of dark silver imbued with semblance magic to cause that rippling water effect when walking," Death said with a voice that was almost a whisper.

We stopped before a set of steps, leading up to a dais where an enormous gold statue of a robed Minotaur stood proudly before us. His billowing cape carried starlight to his back. It ran the length of his body, right down to the train of his robes, which covered his ankles and part of his forefeet. I noticed the statue's feet were the same structure as a human. I wondered if our similarities had them view us as the insignificant beings in the end.

"It is fact. They are here in the Age of Apocalypse." A wise and motherly voice warmed my ears.

Any aches I felt in my heart were soothed by the white robed figure of a bull-woman at the top of the dais before the statue. Her white fur

was free from any blemish a bull would carry; delicate ears were pierced with gold, silver and jade studs, they glistened with an impression of starlight (similar to the statue's cape). Her eyes were completely white, I felt like I was staring at two balls of milk candy.

Her balletic walk towards us was enchanting.

"Your highness, Lord Famine and friends, I welcome you to Minos. There is much we must discuss."

She gestured for us to follow her lead past the statue and down a blue carpeted and silver marble hallway, which ended into a jade and tourmaline circular chamber.

A round pond of dark water (edged with a silver and bronze border) filled up the center of the floor. There were no other pieces of furniture or fixtures in the chamber. The light came from the crystal walls.

Galais positioned us around the pond. I found myself between Brystagg and the bull-woman. We followed Galais's example of kneeling down to the pond's edge, so we were close to the water.

"I am Delphi, Sol Mother of Minos." Delphi introduced herself.

"I would not risk your cell breaking work, Your Highness if I did not feel the importance of what is to come," Delphi said to Brystagg.

Her next choice of words made my fears resurface.

"Apocalypse is in danger of a terrible fate if Famine and Death do not return to the Lotus Bridge of their time and stop the oncoming attacks."

She raised her hand to stay Brystagg's questions and drew our attention towards the pond's dark surface.

"I think it's best to show you the fact that awaits your time Famine, if you do not stop the course of this danger." Her fine hand swept the pond's surface to call upon images to the water.

I gulped down a nervous knot when I saw Trix and Leinard tangled within the gold coin olive tree of the Lotus Bridge. Possessed Death had called upon a cakra type of magic with great magnitude that caused the Aueralius Brothers to writhe about their binds with pain.

My hands trembled, and skin went clammy as I felt their agony from their bodies suffering burns of golden fire; skin went unbearably hot, throbbed and went numb into an uncomfortable coldness. My mind was splintering with pain.

"It hurts Death." I cried out in thought.

"I feel it!" Death yelped and replied with his own, begging for the pain to stop.

"UGH!" I screamed as I felt the brothers' bodies explode into rays of golden light that pieced the black tunnels to make them break and crumble into nothing.

A fierce roar and deafening bellow overwhelmed my ears.

The walls that had contained the demons and criminals were destroyed, allowing them to escape out into the tiers. People were slain where they stood, had their chi stolen to be used against them or devoured.

My heart ached with the feelings of defeat, sweltering anger, trampled hope and realization of failure from the knights that struggled to hold back the magnanimous tide of damage tearing down Hell's Labyrinth and spilling out into the Second District.

More pain stabbed at my heart as the pond's image focused on the fate that befell each one of my friends. They were being either nullified by a demon, tortured by a human, having their chi sucked out of them until they were shriveled shells, burned and brutalized. Completely destroyed beyond repair.

I felt all their fates as if they were my own.

"STOP! Please stop!" I cried as I doubled over with pain.

"No! You must see the course of events!" Delphi ordered.

A power kept my eyes staring at the long-term devastation that was played out in the pond's image.

The Second District laid waste under the claim of demons led by the hiruda. Humans were either devoured or forced into slavery to demons only to be eaten later, lurking as empty shells linked to the will of another or having to eat their own kind to survive. There was no beauty left in the world. No honor nor hope. Nothing that resembled the essence of a human being remained. Humanity had become null. The skies were constantly dark and starless, as smog and a foulness choked the air.

I sniffed and wiped at the tears that had dirtied my face, and pressed a hand to my chest to hold back the stabbing pain breaking my heart. I was gasping for breath.

The pond became black and formless again.

I felt Colin's arms wrap my waist from behind and keep me steady.

"The fate of Minos also shares this one, should you and Death fail to overcome the hiruda."

Delphi's voice assumed her soothing tones. Her hands tenderly stroked my flushed cheeks.

"Gat Shiem's fall was written in the stars, so there was nothing either of you could have done to stop it. However, the hiruda's event is not fixed with fate. You can stop it. Both you and Death."

I gulped down the remainder of the pain I felt and checked on Death when I felt my head had cleared.

"I'm okay now, Famine, but this pain was worse than what I had felt at Gat Shiem." Death sighed.

"Is that why you asked me to bring the boy?" Brystagg asked.

I frowned when he appeared unaffected by the pond's vision.

Delphi nodded. "The Zaldizko Prophecy paints a dark picture if we use dark colors."

Her face lifted with a serene smile, which stirred feelings of peace to soothe away my remaining pains.

"Right now, I am seeing a beautiful color of determination, love and hope from this boy's eyes. His heart is beating with pure virtue. Sol has a bright future if this boy's colors remain bright."

I exhaled a few breaths to reclaim my composure.

"Prince Brystagg, Sirius's boys are the deciders to the fate we have borne witness to." Galais added on. "If they are removed from the Lotus Bridge Primary Core before the Hiruda calls upon the Sacral magic, then the Hiruda can be overcome."

"His boys?" Brystagg's voice tensed with a bitter coldness.

"Yes. Since he had taken Ariella as his queen, they are his."

I noticed a sadness in Brystagg's eyes. He met mine without hiding it.

"So, you are from my future?" Brystagg voice was emotionless as he asked me the question.

"So, it seems," I carefully answered.

"Obviously you know of my kin."

I sighed, sensing his curiosity.

"If you're referring to the men on the Lotus Bridge, yes, I know them. They are Captain Trix and Lieutenant Colonel Leinard of the Evadale Knight Order."

I flinched at Brystagg's change of expression. Somehow, I had said golden words that made his sadness go bye-bye.

"Trent and Leinard do not belong to The Illuminate Group?"

I sensed his hope for my answer to confirm a no.

"No." I reassured him and yelped at the stinging pinch Colin had given my thigh.

"What? I'm sure they would have found out eventually from Delphi." I signed to Colin and ran my hands through my hair at the end.

Brystagg released a deep sigh. His face relaxed into a calm expression. He was relieved by the fact?

"You are going to need my help back to that Lotus Bridge." Brystagg declared and looked to where Lyra knelt.

She had been quiet and carefully observing our reactions.

"Are you with me, Lyra?"

She sighed and lowered her eyes. "Since when have I ever disagreed with your final orders, Sire?"

Lyra stared me hard in the eye. "You can save my daughter from her fate back there?"

"If Colin and I get back to the Lotus Bridge, I most likely could." I confirmed.

Lyra flashed me a cocky smile. "Guess it's any reason to speed up the mining progress."

"You won't have time for this. We have done what we can to ensure Famine's path of fate, the Hiruda made, lead in our favor. Events on the Lotus Bridge are moving quickly and further from my power," Delphi said as she stood and prompted us to follow her lead out of the chamber.

My mind was swarming with questions and half answers, highlighting pressing ones for Death's opinion.

"How is it possible that we are in the past?"

"Anything is possible when you combine zirconia with preservation magic. However, it's not recommended tampering with time," Death commented.

I sensed his troubled thoughts.

"Hey. Do you really think we can return to the Lotus Bridge and stop that hiruda?"

My mind was quiet before I heard Death sigh.

"Honestly, I think the likelihood is slim. That creature was able to kick me out of my own body, then draw upon sophisticated power to throw you back into time."

I gulped. "Do we even have a smidgen of a chance?"

"All is not lost, Baby Brother. If the hiruda is abiding to magism, then it will be following a set order dictated for preservation magic."

Death continued his reassurance by throwing out some tried and tested magism facts and theories, which had turned into another one of his crash courses on Magism Conduct & Consequence Violations pertaining to preservation magic.

My eyes drooped with sleep as his voice droned on about violations described in Section 35, related consequences noted in Section 46 and potential punishments listed in Section 76.

"Freend sleepy?"

I felt awake and instant joy by the sound of Small Cap's voice.

"You've been alright, Small Cap? My brother hasn't intruded on too much of your space? He can be nosy, so I was worried he had worn you down." I fussed.

"I beg a differ!" Death butted in. At least he had stopped with his lecture.

"Me be fine, Freend. Be sleeping. Me okay now."

I sensed refreshed vitality and spirit from my spider friend.

"You've been lost in thought," said Brystagg. I noticed that his eyes were carefully observing me.

"Oh, um, yeah." I averted his gaze.

"I've been thinking Delphi. What did you mean by it is up to Famine and Death?" Brystagg's question may have been directed to Delphi, but his eyes were pushing for my answer.

Delphi stared at my belt pouch for her answer.

I sighed, flicked Colin a look before I called out Small Cap to the pouch.

"A spider?!" Lyra gasped with both horror and surprise at the sight of Small Cap's head poking out of the belt pouch.

"Sort of my brother Death at the moment," I explained.

"Death is that?" Brystagg's face twisted with a look of disbelief as he pointed a finger at Small Cap.

"It's a long story; one I'm not smart enough to explain," I said.

"Well, that fact I can easily accept," said Lyra with a wry expression.

"For another time, perhaps." Brystagg brushed off further questions.

I focused on the direction we were headed.

Silence trailed our footsteps along blue carpeted and silver marble hallways, for a long while, until we reached an end.

I was overcome with a mad bout of giggles from the tickles I felt all over my body.

"Where this coming from?" I giggled and stiffened when Brystagg's hands cupped my ears.

"Lasaitu zure nerbioak." His spell and soothing voice settled my tickles.

I blushed beetroot and shook myself free from his hands.

"Um, thanks," I mumbled awkwardly and cursed my pounding heart beats.

There was no way in hell this man was going to make my heart race with feelings other than rage, fear and intimidation.

"So, the uncle now? Famine, you are a worry with your fickle heart." Death commented, which made me rant, stupidly, aloud.

"Sorry. It's a brother thing," I apologized to appease everyone's weird stares fixed on me.

I flinched at Lyra's hearty chuckles that she quelled as soon she saw all eyes on her.

Delphi and Galais led us into a bizarre, cube shaped room of pulsing white stone.

The walls were seamless. An iron box hovered in midair at the center. The room's space was void of other objects or furniture. It was a display room for the box.

"Burr! Isn't it freezing," I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself.

"Would you rather the tickles?" Lyra smirked.

I ignored her sarcasm and imagined I was being warmed up by a hot cup of cocoa.

"That box." Death's voice trembled.

Did this box contain another one of those objects that Adams-san used to neutralize Gat Shiem's defenses, allowing in the Neska Gudari?

"Those warriors were Neska Gudari?" Death asked when he had

picked up on my thought.

"According to War," I soberly answered.

"You've seen War?" Death's voice quivered.

I sensed his urge to cry.

"Yeah. Sorry, I forgot to mention, War's safe back in our time; living the sweet mansion life with a capable group of knights." I eased his concerns.

"Thank you, Buddha." Death exhaled, relieved.

"And Pestilence?"

I sighed; hope had to run out of steam at some point.

"I don't know. I haven't found him yet."

"Do not dismay, Baby Brother. Once I'm back inside my body, and we defeat this hiruda, the three of us will track down Pestilence and bring him back to safety."

Delphi drew our attention to the matter at hand. We gathered around her and the iron box.

"This box was placed in the temple's care by the Black Rider during my great ancestor's time." Delphi's voice was of absolute reverence.

I frowned at the familiarity of that name, but couldn't pinpoint where I had heard it. Maybe it was in one of the books I had flicked through in the Library Tower. A time I had been lazing about the chairs to watch War work.

I gulped when Delphi's conversation was directed to me.

"According to the writings of my Ancestor, one day the box will need to pass to the one who can hold it. This one will use it to reset false destinies."

I flinched when her finger pointed to my chest, then to the box.

"Um, Death, so the thing in that iron box you opened, same as this one, almost made you a basket case, right?"

His silence made me more uneasy.

"Death?"

"Sorry, I was trying to find the best words to calm your fears, but couldn't."

"Oh God! You're not expecting me to open that b-box, are you?" I fidgeted with my fingers and hissed at the expectant looks on everyone's faces.

"What's so bad at opening a box?" Lyra innocently asked.

I glared at her ignorant question.

"Oh, so you understand what this box contains." Galais noticed.

I nodded and told them that a man had brought a version of one to the temple home I came from.

"Temple home?" Galais asked.

"He is from Gat Shiem, Galais." Delphi answered.

"Gat Shiem?!" Brystagg and Lyra spoke at the same time.

"Who are you Famine?" Lyra looked worried. Her question was ignored.

I closed my eyes, braced myself for the worst. I opened them again when I had steadied my will.

I gingerly raised a hand to the box, then cowardly retracted it.

"You don't really need me to?" I asked with hopefully eyes and sighed at everyone's set expressions.

"Here goes," I released a deep breath and placed my hand on the box's clasp.

I unhooked the clasp. The box opened.

Chomp!

"Ugh!" I hopped madly on the spot, my fingers aching with cutting pain.

"It bit me! The ruddy thing bit me!" I growled at the evil box.

Brystagg sighed. He waved his hand over mine whilst muttering a spell.

My hands glowed with green light that took away my pain when it had faded.

"You're a hira," I whispered and glanced at Colin, whose brows were raised.

"Of sorts," Brystagg confirmed.

"Fine. Let's try this again." I calmed myself with deep breaths.

I flipped the box's lid wide, swiftly retracting my hands before it could do the chomp.

I groaned when I saw an object the shape and size of an ice cube. It wasn't as white as the one Death had described. Instead, it shone with a golden hue.

"One, two... three!" I counted and grabbed the cube.

My hand was stuck inside the box by a powerful force.

"Holy crap!" I yelped, feeling my palms burn, but I couldn't let go of

the cube.

Gold light poured out of the box to blind my eyes.

My ears rang from an omnipotent voice that telepathically spoke ancient words steeped with the energies of age and wisdom.

The voice's strength increased to a near bone shattering volume.

Orduan nago, orain ni naiz, ni naiz, izango naiz.

Rays of light stabbed my heart, head, hands and all my vital organs.

"NO!" I begged before my voice was silenced with pain.

"Famine! Hold on to me!" I felt Death's voice desperately reaching out for me.

Orduan nago, orain ni naiz, ni naiz, izango naiz.

My head numbed with sweltering heat. I couldn't see, think clearly.

"Hold on Famine!"

Orduan nago, orain ni naiz, ni naiz, izango naiz. Deitu nire izena.

"GODDAMN IT! YOU WILL NOT HAVE MY BROTHER!" Death's curses banged against my head.

Ni naiz, izango naiz. Deitu nire izena.

"I AM DEATH!"

The pain stopped.

I felt a soothing cold calm my frazzled nerves. It restored my senses to normal.

I gawked at the sight of Small Cap hovering in midair where the box should be. He was glorified in golden light.

"Freend. What be going on?" Small Cap asked with a trembling voice.

"It is the Zaldizko's power!" Delphi gasped.

She lowered herself to her knees to pay her respects to Small Cap.

"I feel it Famine. The Chiorntex's power controlling life is flowing through my mind." Death's voice seemed distant and strange.

"Death?" I gulped and yelped when Small Cap flew back into my belt pouch.

He stopped glowing.

"We can go back now, but this power is too raw to use. It will burn up anything in this state. I need a filter." Death said from the belt pouch.

It took me a moment to realize that the voice had rebounded off the walls.

"The spider talks." Lyra noted.

"It is because the Zaldizko has taken back some of his power." Delphi confirmed as she rose to her feet.

I frowned. "Are you saying that my brother is this Zaldizko?"

"Of course, and so are you," she answered matter-of-factually like it was a known fact.

"Lemme get this straight. So, this Zaldizko is meant to be this fancy, god like, horseman who has power over this world, right?" I scratched my head.

"Both our saviors and our destroyers, depending on the power they wield before us." Delphi confirmed. "They hold the hana of this world. Through my studies, I have come to view the hana as the Zaldizko's power, one with the Chiorntex."

"So, I take it that Death just reclaimed a bit of his hana." I spoke my thought aloud.

She nodded with confirmation.

I looked at Small Cap who was resting, princely, in the belt pouch.

"Oi! Death, you better not get carried away with this power and stuff things up." I warned him.

"I think I'm more capable in this area than you would be, Famine." Death's voice rebounded off the walls, which made Lyra burst with laughter.

The ominous room had lifted with a lighter spirit.

"Yes. I do feel more relieved that a spider is in control of this power," she said at the end of her chuckles.

"Sheesh, no one has faith in me," I moped.

Delphi approached me with a warm smile. "Your virtue and innocence are what set men apart from gods. You are the shining light when all hope is lost. That is not something to feel bad about, is it?"

"Thank you." I bowed my thanks and felt reassured of my place in this world.

"I am surprised that the Black Rider would have had this power to give." Galais frowned.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"It was not his power," he answered with a sigh.

"No one knows the why's and how's of that time, Galais. The fact remains, the power was returned to its rightful owner. False destinies

can now be reset." Delphi's words drew the matter to a close.

We followed her out of the room and the way back to the bull statue.

"You will find what you need back within the cell mines," Delphi said and faced me with a motherly smile.

"Famine, I am most blessed to have met you. It has been an honor. I am content to know that Sol's future continues to be bright with you in our world."

I paid her humble respects with a prayer bow.

Galais saw us out of the temple and across the courtyard to the domed entrance.

"This is where we part ways, Your Highness, my Lords. May Mithras guide your way," Galais said his farewells.

We found our way back to the dais and to my namesake statue, where Buru was still waiting for us.

"All's well Milord?" Buru asked.

"All is well." Brystagg reassured him.

Lyra unfolded her fans and set the sparrows free to take us back to the Office of Exacles.

Return to Sender

"Famine." Brystagg faced me with intent.

His stance was firm, still hands fingertips away from his guns.

"I caught wind of rumors about a banshee's lair destroyed in a shoot-out by two men, before your arrival." His fingers touched the tops of his guns. "You look incapable."

He turned to Colin.

"Here's a different story. I see a man of ability."

Colin acknowledged the compliment with a detached expression.

I closed my eyes.

So, I was barely a man. Go figure.

My eyes opened to a close-up view of a gun barrel pointed at my nasal bridge. The cold metal touched my skin. I felt immovable.

"You didn't flinch." Brystagg tilted his head to gain another perspective of my face.

"Sire?" I gulped.

He cocked his gun to fire; the tip of the barrel pressing my bone.

Strangely, the thought of having my head blown off kept me rooted. My heart slowed until it was almost still.

"Impressive."

We held this nerve-wracking position for a while.

Eventually, he lowered his gun, put it to rest and returned it to its holster.

"Well done." Brystagg surprised me with a heavy pat on my back.

I slumped to the ground, feeling my limbs go to jelly. It was a test.

"I think I saw stars dancing around my grave," I murmured.

Colin helped me back to my feet.

"The cell has changed," Brystagg said, like it was an explanation for his test.

"Changed?" I frowned.

Lyra answered by unfolding her fan and waving it over a snake statue. She mumbled a spell to make it glow with unworldly blue light.

I turned to see the source of the cold energy I felt to my back. The Zaldizko statues burned with blue fire. The magical words that formed our names became a number.

"0211?" I read aloud.

"The present year we are in. It was 0191 when we had left for Minos." Lyra answered. "Delphi was able to grant us a last favor with her power."

Colin signed that we had returned to our time.

"That helps." I sighed.

"Not the only favor," Brystagg said.

His was staring at my namesake statue. A greenish spotlight glowed at the rearing horse's belly. He tapped about the stone, then punched the belly.

"Is that really necessary?" I groaned.

My eyes widened with surprise when the stone of the belly section transformed into an image of a silver box.

Brystagg removed the box, transforming the stone to its original form.

"How?" The world's mysterious wonders continued to baffle me.

"I fear your brain would explode if I tried to explain." Lyra brushed off my question.

We gathered around Brystagg as he opened the box to reveal small trinkets: an iron pocket mirror, glass balls filled with water and small bags of iron marble shooters.

"She never fails to impress." Lyra's face lit up at the sight of our care package.

Brystag handed me the pocket mirror. He explained that the mirror was called a Portspell. It was used to displace lifeforms away from the holder.

I opened the mirror and noticed the reflective surface had a bluish sheen.

"Form an L-shape. It's important to keep that angle. The top part faces the target, so their face is reflected in the mirror." Brystagg instructed me.

He showed me what happened when the bottom half was moved horizontally on its pivot join whilst saying, 'utz nazazu'.

Colin went flying off the dais and hitting the part of the wall the portspell's bottom half was pointed at. He stumbled to his feet, flicking

me a rude finger.

"Close the mirror to seal it." Brystagg finished off his instruction. He moved onto the marbles.

I was handed a small, velvety, bag of marbles called Shrills due to the noise they made when airborne. I recognized these from the time Wilfred had used them on the skrit. Their effect was basic. Throw it at a target while saying the word 'su' to make it go *schwoop* and become glitter.

"Not lots you'd give a kid to play with, that's for sure." I gingerly stowed the bag next to my brother, ignoring his grumbles about having something dangerous next to him.

Colin removed his dark patchwork overcoat to reveal his tanned double gun holsters over his shoulders. He removed his holsters and stood before me.

"Hey!" I cursed when he spun me around to fit the holsters over my shoulders.

I squirmed at the leather straps that were crisscrossed on my back and clipped into the top-level of my belt. The weight of the guns against my waist felt weird.

"I really have to use these?" I groaned.

"To retrieve your brother's body and save the world, yes." Brystagg answered for Colin.

Colin redressed in his overcoat. He tapped my shoulder. I saw his firm resolve in his eyes with his nod.

If Delphi saw the need to send us the care package, it meant we were in for a hell of time.

"Are we ready?" Brystagg checked with us.

"Since when is ready." I answered.

"Wonder how much this prison has changed in 20 years," Lyra said.

She let out a deep breath and headed for the exit.

Colin stopped us before we opened the double doors. He placed his index finger on the silver-gray film over his right eye. After a short while, he signed that his maplink had finished receiving an update of the labyrinth.

We followed his lead out.

We fell down a steep decline of the corridor as soon as we had stepped out of the Office of Exacle's doors.

"BLO-ODY... HELL!"

My screams were muffled by the force of gravity pushing against my face. I involuntarily cursed at every poke and jab felt from protruding edges. We fell at a ludicrous, uncontrollable, speed through winding tourmaline and obsidian tunnels.

'DUCK!" Death shouted in my inner ear.

I narrowly missed a jagged rock that almost saw my head off.

My ears swelled with heat, rang with pain. The zooming way before me was a blur.

"ARGH!" I yelped.

My body did an involuntary tumble into Brystagg.

We dropped down a straight vertical tunnel of pitch-black darkness and landed on black rock made visible by subdued red light.

"Ouch!" I winced at the tender pain I felt to my thighs and rib cage.

Lyra and Buru's cursing followed us down.

I mustered some strength to roll away from their falling forms, and had unfortunately moved to the spot to be underneath Colin.

"Gef off meh fool," I gagged with tears squeezed out of my eyes.

Colin rolled off me.

"Did any of you magis geniuses think about using a spell to cushion our fall?!" I complained when I had reclaimed my breath.

"Could you do a spell falling at those high speeds?" Lyra answered with a loaded question.

Fair point.

Brystagg had lost his hat. His stylish, messy crop of brown hair brought thoughts of Leinard to my mind. I had to get back to him and return Death to his body. I had no idea on how to do either, but I would find a way when I got there.

"Are you okay?" His calm voice pulled my thoughts back to the present.

He checked on our condition, using his hira magic to heal superficial wounds.

Colin wrapped a bandage around Buru's waist to stop yucky bits of pus and blood oozing out of the wound to his side.

"You can't heal that?" I asked Brystagg, pointing to Buru's wound, and gulped at the murderous glare he gave me in response.

Lyra sniggered. "He'd have to perform bestiality to do that."

"I've healed what I could for you guys to walk unaided." Brystagg's murderous eyes were redirected to hers.

"You have my thanks, Sire." She changed the subject.

"Meh be fine," Buru calmly reassured everyone.

"You're like that saying, strong as an ox." I lightly joked and copped a glare from the minotaur.

"Meh not an ox." He firmly asseverated.

"Aah," I nervously scratched my head, realizing I had struck a sore spot.

"Geeze Famine, your ignorant mouth is astonishing. Ox are castrated creatures, forced to labor. It's clear he's proud of being otherwise." Death's chiding voice stirred an ache to my temples.

"I didn't mean it that way" I groaned, turning my attention to Colin to change the subject.

Colin was focused on taking stock of his inventory.

I checked my own gear, satisfied to see that the guns were still cased in their holsters, the portspell and bag of shrill marbles were in my belt pouch next to Small Cap.

"Mirror, guns, marbles, looks like I still have them." I ticked off my inventory aloud.

"Marbles? You sure about that?" Lyra derisively questioned.

I poked my tongue in response to her wryness.

"Settle down, children," Brystagg said to call order.

We gathered around him to discuss our next steps.

Gurgles and scratching noises made us tense and go quiet.

"Oh, my, my, it's been a while," hissed a familiar voice with a tone far from being warm and welcoming.

"It can't be!" Lyra gasped. Her blue eyes were dilated with fear.

The creature's fleering was making me feel skittish.

"You boys and girls haven't changed. The same delectable morsels, delightful," sniggered the banshee balancing a homburg hat on its creepy redback spider head that had human features.

Its pudgy backside wagged up and down as its legs tested spring for a pounce.

Colin reflectively formed a protective barrier around us.

"I'm doing my best not to crap myself here. Doesn't that thing's face and voice resemble too much of that piggy cheeks Homburg creep!" I

shuddered.

I was surprised to see Lyra looking as spooked as I was.

"Sire, if he's..." Her voice trembled.

Brystagg pulled her into a hug and lovingly kissed her forehead. "It'll be alright."

"Eh!" I blurted.

My fear was overridden by shock from seeing the man's display of affection.

"Don't tell me that both of you?!" I wagged a finger at them to finish off the rest of my question.

Both replied with an affirming look in their eyes.

"Couldn't you have done better?" I blurted my impressions of their relationship to Brystagg and copped a painful kick to my stomach from Lyra.

"Yep, like daughter," I groaned.

My eyes narrowed at Colin and Buru's stifled laughter.

"Well, thanks to an idiot, I've calmed down." Lyra coolly closed further discussions on the matter.

Our focus returned to the homburg banshee parading our barrier.

I cursed at the sight of banshee reinforcements entering the cavern I just realized we were in.

Although, I don't know how long it had been a cavern, since the walls were continually reassembling themselves like building blocks. The layout of the place changed every few minutes. Right now, the place was enormous enough to hold more than twenty clutters of redback spiders, the size of children.

Colin frowned and placed a finger over his maplink-eye.

"This is no good. The tunnels are reforming at an absurd rate. Even the fixed paths are moving to merge with other paths," his hands nervously signed.

"What does that mean? No fixed paths?" I signed my questions, rephrasing Colin's information by voice for the others.

"That means the tunnels are reforming to make one pattern. There'll eventually be no walls." Brystagg gulped.

A sickness churned my stomach, my heart pounded with irregular beats when I realized his words and fear.

Hell's Labyrinth would become one space that was free for all and

without a barrier keeping it separated from everywhere else. The Second District would be vulnerable to mass demon attacks.

Jarring bangs and thuds to our barrier drew our focus back to the present issue.

Walls would be the least of our problems if we weren't able to escape the banshee manically smashing against our barrier with their intentions to make a meal of us.

I gasped when I recognized the human resemblance on some of the banshees, and saw that Brystagg had noticed this too from his troubled expression.

"Sire, whatever happened to the BHT was twenty years ago. You're not responsible for this!" I shouted at his face to snap him out of thoughts that would hinder our escape.

"Famine, they were my people. I'm responsible." Brystagg's voice was level. He was doing his best to hold in his emotions.

"Then take responsibility, end their banshee misery to give their impressions back their humanity." I faced him with will and resolution.

Brystagg chuckled and patted my head. "You're a conundrum. I can't decide whether your dumbness is to disguise your intelligence or something else."

"I'd go for devilishly handsome," I positively answered.

"What's to figure out? Dumb is dumb," Lyra smirked.

"Famine has a point. Let's end their misery once and for all." She unsheathed her koto sword for action.

I glanced about the faces of Colin and Buru who were also ready to dish out the pain.

Brystagg steadied his hands and unsheathed his guns.

We positioned ourselves around the barrier for the best vantage point. Brystagg briefed us on a plan of attack. Colin reversed the barrier to repeal the surrounding banshee.

It was now or never.

The cavern walls quaked from the high-pitched shrieking, fierce scratching on rock and the intense rush of battle.

"This isn't working!" I shouted over blaring gunfire.

I instinctively crouched to avoid an oncoming redback, aimed my guns and fired. Spider bodies and body pieces thudded to the ground.

More replaced the fallen.

My fingers were cramping up from rapid firing. Hot smoke stuffed up my nose. The taste of iron was drying out my throat. My eyes drooped.

I was staggering, so bloody exhausted.

"We've no choice! For Death!" Brystagg shouted near my ear.

No fair. Pulling out that card. Of course, my body would respond with an adrenaline rush.

He pressed his back to mine to steady my stance. We held out our guns and fired rounds, stepping in a clockwork circle to blow off spider heads and spindly limbs aiming for us.

I saw Lyra dodging web attacks, smoothly hacking a clutter to pieces. She was enthralled with oncoming attackers that she hadn't detected the one behind her.

Bullet projectiles from my guns caused the spider at her back to explode before it could carry out with its nasty stab attack.

Lyra heaved with a thankful sigh. She continued with her skillful slash attacks.

Buru was next to her, pulverizing, shredding spider body parts with his bare hands and using the webbing roped around his arms to smash banshee into each other before tearing free.

I was worried he'd be poisoned by the viscous spider gunk his hands were in contact with. So far, he appeared to be okay.

Colin entered our firing circle. He called upon a bidea wave to dissipate a massive ring of spiders into glittering air.

"Why the hell didn't you do that earlier?!" I shouted.

"It hurts my head, that's why," he clumsily signed.

Lyra and Buru also entered our area when they saw a new formation of banshee surround us.

Colin was preparing himself for another bidea wave when the banshee turned tail and fled.

"Why?" I gulped.

The crunching and grinding sounds from the walls and floors containing us provided an answer.

The floor broke apart.

"Shit!" My voice trailed off as we fell.

My heart thumped with threats of stopping. We ducked our heads, dodging flying red bricks that were reforming walls around us.

"Aargh!" I heard Buru cry out next to me.

Our descent unexpectedly stopped. A new floor had been reformed under our feet. I glanced in an L-shaped corridor that opened out to a generous rectangular room.

"Buru." I sheathed my guns to check his arm.

It was badly bruised, possibly broken. He was heaving for breath; his skin was clammy and the wound to his side was leaking blood onto the bandage. I sensed his pupils were dilated. Not good.

"Buru, Imma gonna do this sorry." I swallowed down an awkward breath, convincing myself that what I was about to do was to save a friend's life.

"Here goes." I scrunched my nose, yanked his head towards mine, and squeezed my eyes closed when I used my hira magic to heal his dangerous wounds.

This experience was the most taxing on my energies by far. I sighed with relief when Buru released me with a healthy roar at the end of it.

The minotaur ripped off the bloodied bandage to reveal a healthy, wound free waist; his bruises were gone.

"Famine, how long have you had this squeamish power?!" Death was stupefied.

I ignored him.

"I'm going to forget this sight for all eternity," Lyra squirmed.

"Please do." I groaned, mustering my strength to stand.

"Thank you, Young Lord." Buru slapped my back with his hearty appreciation.

I ignored Brystagg's raised brows and mouth twitching with sarcasm.

Rushing figures from the far end of the rectangular space put us back on alert.

My arms weren't strong enough to hold guns. Death provided an answer for a weapon when he nudged the bag of shrills towards the top of the belt pouch.

I cupped an iron marble in each hand and raised my arms for the throw.

"Wait!" I heard a familiar voice call out. "Famine!?"

I lowered my arms, eager to believe what I heard and the sight I was seeing.

"Wilfred!" I rushed to him.

Wilfred examined me for a moment before lowering his guns.

"Thank god, we've finally found you. We're the hell you been?!" He madly nudged my shoulders with the nose of his guns. "War's been on this scary rampage to get to you!"

"Wilfred?!" I heard Lita desperately call out behind him.

She stepped into view with a short sword raised at Brystagg's head. "Colonel! We've you been? What the heck are you wearing?"

Her head tipped to one side with a quizzical frown at the rugged outfit Brystagg wore. She lowered her sword.

Colin enclosed us in a protective barrier.

"Colonel?" Brystagg frowned.

"He's Your Royal Highness Prince Brystagg," I corrected Lita.

"Really? But if you're High Prince Brystagg, that means..." Lita nervously gulp.

"Walls aren't the only aspect going haywire." Wilfred finished off for her. "The fact that you're not in our data loads is proof."

"What about the others? Where's War?" I pressed them with my questions.

Wilfred telepathically provided an explanation. His mind replayed events not long after the time I had been pulled into the mirror.

The squad had been called to an emergency summons to be a taskforce backing on duty knights who were struggling against a sudden, abnormal revolt of demon and prisoners.

"Teagan, my former captain, her squad was the first to fall to the wall break-downs. Some of my colleagues..." He expelled a sigh of remorse and continued with his telepathic update.

"We made it to a pivot landing when, literally, all Hell broke loose."

I saw his perspective of when the Wisteria Garden Squad had reached the First Tier to find the tunnels rebuilding themselves into an uncontrollable tangle. Some of the tunnel entry points had destroyed a few pivot landing platforms.

The knights had no choice but to jump into a moving tunnel. None of the maplink paths were lending them back to other pivot landing points. If they did, the landings were destroyed.

"What's worse, none of the link paths trace back to the Lotus Bridge. Your brother was able to work out a method for the path's next

direction, but even that was for the next path contact. We're roaming blind," he continued to explain in thought.

"Was War with you guys?"

I bit back the worry I felt at seeing War skillfully fend off revolting prisoners and demons with a longsword from his thoughts.

"Yeah," Wilfred carefully answered.

"He convinced Jensen to take him. Glad we did. As you can see, he's an impressive swordsman. I'd almost wager he's a combat specialist equal to our captain. He saved our hides a few times." He telepathically finished off his update.

Impressive fighter or not, it was War the hiruda was after. If the demon found out that he was right under his nose, all would be lost.

"Where's War?"

"With the others before we were separated," Lita carefully answered. She had been keeping a careful eye on the others up to this point.

I calmed myself down and briefed the twins on my situation, introducing Buru and Lyra in the process.

"It's worse than I thought," Wilfred nervously commented.

"Per chance your name be Lyra Kazama, house leader for the Neska Gudari Kazama Head?" Lita politely asked Lyra with a bow to change the subject.

"You know me?" Lyra asked.

She nodded her head at the sight of the maplink covering Lita's right eye. "Of course, the maplink."

"Actually, I know of you from somewhere else, Kazama-sama."

The expression on Lyra's face was one of delight. She sidled up close to Lita. "Finally, someone with intelligence and manners."

I was unable to contain my knowing chuckles.

"Something funny you want to share?" Lyra eyes narrowed.

"Oh nothing." I zipped my lips.

Familiar grinding sounds from the walls drew our focus back to our surroundings. Fortunately, the floors didn't dissemble themselves.

Every red brick wall was magically rearranged to form an enormous circular chamber with no roof. At least, one that wasn't visible.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I shouted out my frustration.

"Well, well, we meet again," sniggered Homburg Banshee, who was

backed with his remaining spider party.

"Indeed, we do," said a deep and threatening voice.

My heart thumped madly at the sight of a well-built man stoically walking towards us. I was able to see the deep X-scarring on his neck.

Amos Dillen.

I squinted in the image of the approaching man, unable to believe the face I had recognized.

He was obviously a lot older and taller since that time we had worked the zirconia vein together.

Those simple, calm brown eyes of a thirteen-year-old boy now carried a deep and serious undertone of a thirty-something adult. His head was almost bald, with a shorn carpet of brown hair lining his scalp.

Gone were those innocent boy freckles. Instead, his face was smooth, set with a hardened expression. His ear lobes were pierced with studs of glass-silver material, similar to the texture of the dermaleeches attached to the lantern room's night table.

The transformation to his body shocked me the most. He was covered, neck to toe, in a black bodysuit. It made his abnormally long limbs obvious. I noticed the silver marble scaring of his skin between the cuffs of his sleeves and black gloves.

His whitish X scar was a traumatic, deep gash wound that ran from the top of his collarbone to the underside of his neck. The scaring was evident of a knife attack.

"Amos?" Lyra carefully asked.

"Lyra Kazama. It's infuriating to see your sickly pretty face unaged. I guess coming back from Minos had its perks." Amos snarled.

"And you, Sire. I had a million words to say about your cowardly departure. Abandoning the ones, you called your people." He stepped before Brystagg, so they were standing eye to eye.

Brystagg averted his gaze.

"As I thought. No words are worth speaking to a coward prince. No wonder you lost the crown, your wife, kids. Like they could love a bastard prince, lonely boy, loser freak, worthless gutter snipe!" Amos spat out his acrimonious words.

"HEY!" I shouted, stepping between them with my guns raised at Amos. "Try saying that again with a bullet in your gut!"

"Ha! Your hands are shaking, you can barely hold them, Famine." He stepped back towards Homburg Banshee and his restless spider gang.

"What the hell? I'll grant you the shot, Mister Demi-god."

Amos smirked as he stepped into a clear line of sight with his arms stretched wide.

"Famine, don't take the shot!" Death's voice broke through the stillness of my mind.

"Why Death? I can take him down!" I raised my guns to fire.

"You do that, you'll cause the walls to dissemble prematurely. It's something I've noticed when you've been fighting. The gun's noise and jarring movements triggers the change. We don't have the numbers to fight of them off in a changed space if it becomes smaller."

I glanced about the walls and noticed some tell-tale trembling to the red bricks.

"You wish X-man freak." I placed the guns to rest in their holsters and heard a few sighs behind my back. So, Death wasn't the only one who had noticed.

"What's the meaning of this Aidoneus? What you up to this time?" Wilfred stoically questioned the man, his hands in close range of his guns.

"Aidoneus?" I frowned. "Who?"

Lita pointed to X-man freak with her short sword. "Aidoneus Dillen, former Map of Hell's Labyrinth who was court-martial for murder."

"Ha! You Smithsonian side characters haven't changed. Damn boring, righteous brats." He snarled. "This is getting tedious."

I gasped when a claymore of sliver-white light formed in his hands.

We braced ourselves for the fight.

"I'm going to rip your heart out of your puny chest!" He came at me with his claymore aimed for my chest.

I yelped and dodged the stab attack.

Aidoneus skillfully swung the blade down towards my neck. It was in a position for a clean shot to my Adam's apple.

Clink-chink!

Lita's glinting short sword stopped his blade's momentum inches away from my throat.

I rolled out of their path and into the clear line of sight of the BHT banshee redback spider gang.

My hands grabbed a fist full of shrill marbles and pelleted the advancing banshee to make them implode. Glitter filled the air.

Meanwhile, I spied Lita still locked in a spar with Aidoneus. Her short sword, breaking his blade's long-range attacks. He surprised her when his claymore instantly transformed into a pair of sais. They continued their fight on an even level.

She danced around his swipe attacks to skillfully apply her own, only to be blocked by his low angle swings or other unorthodox stab attacks. His sparring was rapidly exhausting her arms. He attacked ferociously.

Maniacal brown eyes were fixed on hers with purpose. She gasped when his eye color gradually filled to an evil red, the harder they fought. He moved faster, stronger and more brutal.

Her voice involuntarily cried out with pain when a sai attack slashed across her arm, knocking her sword out of her hands. She slumped to the ground, gripping her bleeding arm tight.

Aidoneus's attacking form swam about her muddled vision. All she could clearly see was the pair of silver sais, held in sinew black-gloved fingers, raised to take off her head.

"Ihes egin ezazu orain - bastard!" Wilfred shouted.

Aidoneus went flying away from Lita before he could land the killing blow.

"KILL THEM ALL!" He vehemently spat out, picking himself up for another attack.

The chamber became a fierce battle arena.

Redback spiders shot web threads at moving targets and hitting dead air. They leapt for heads, only to implode and fill the air with dirty silver glitter. Slashing leg attacks were blocked with razor sharp steel.

Chinking of steel on steel charged the atmosphere. The chamber stank of iron fillers, astringent spider guts, blood and sweat. Heat and pain were felt all around.

"FAMINE! DON'T YOU DARE RUN FROM ME!" Aidoneus shouted, pushing spittle out of his mouth.

He rushed at me with his claymore, intending to joust me to the wall.

I stood firm, replacing the shrills with the portspell pocket mirrors.

"Famine, what the heavens are you doing?! Move out of the way!"

Death's frantic yelling in my head stirred prickly pain to my temples.

"Shuddup." I answered back, focusing on the pointed tip of X-man freak's claymore.

My hands opened the portspell. I positioned the mirrored top to the claymore's pointed tip and turned the bottom half toward Homburg Banshee's spider stomach.

"Not yet." I steadied myself as the tip raced closer toward the portspell.

My heart beats slowed as my mind became a single point of focus.

"Utz nazazu!" Words resounded about the charged air, carried on the back of a determined shout.

Aidoneus's claymore went, piercing into Homburg Banshee's exposed stomach as he was rearing for a slash attack to Brystagg's head.

"UGH!" Aidoneus snarled, annoyance and hatred contorting his face to form an uglier expression.

"Famine," he hissed.

Brystagg recovered from his fallen position to take advantage. He raised a short sword and pierced Homburg Banshee's opened wound to finish off the job. The banshee reeled with pain.

"Your fault Sire... you did this... to... us... curse...yo..." Homburg spat out his curse with his final breath before going still.

Lyra threw a glass water ball at his body. It shattered on its still form and made it melt to the ground to confirm his end.

Aidoneaus grabbed Brystagg's waist with extraordinary long hands similar to a skrit. His abnormal strength raised the struggling high prince into the air.

"How admirable of you Sire to put the BHT spider freaks out of their misery." Aidoneaus's smooth voice dripped with bitter sarcasm.

He slammed Brystagg to the ground. Once. Twice. Thrice. Letting him go when he was certain the man felt the pain, coolly dodging every attack we could muster against him.

My heart thumped with a realization that he had barely been making an effort to attack us. Now that he was freer to move around the chamber with the elimination of the BHT redback spider gang, he could go all out.

Our side wasn't in good shape for an all-out attack.

Colin was unconscious on the ground next to Buru. He had used too much of his bidea power protecting us earlier, and it had knocked him out cold. As a result, Buru had been impacted the most with poisonous stab wounds all over his torso and limbs in an effort of protecting him from banshee attacks.

Wilfred's right arm and his left wrist had gash wounds. He had been able to stop himself from bleeding out completely, but it left him weak to move. Lita's strength was almost spent, she had also suffered a wound to one of her legs that was stopping her from standing upright. Now Brystagg had become unmovable from Aidoneaus's thrush attack.

Lyra threw every remaining glass ball at the black-suited freak. She found herself having to dodge her own attacks from the force magic he had used to repel them back on her. The near misses had exhausted all her strength.

"Look at your pitiful selves. Homburg and the BHT's lack of skill was disappointing, but not surprising." He smugly stood before me, meeting my eyes with his cocky challenge.

"I had high hopes you were skilled fighters determined to save the world. Especially you, Sire. Pitiful. You deserve to lie there and revert to null." He turned his attention to Brystagg.

"Look at you, being this badass demon. Seems like some boy never grew up." I cockily clapped my hands at his villainous chitchat.

"Why's your issues Sire's fault? He didn't turn you into a freak, did he? No, you're a kid looking for someone else to blame for your stupidity, which made you this thing." I tested for a sore spot.

He rushed at me with the tip of his newly formed claymore, a hair's breadth away from the side of my neck. Looks like I had hit it.

"You play cute, wiggling your piece of tail about like a trollop. I'd rather be a freak than a disgusting, useless, piece of sexual diseased trash." He maniacally laughed as his sword swung up with momentum for a killing blow.

I was able to miss its attack from cutting my neck open. My arm received the blow. I stumbled backwards, acutely feeling the searing, sharp pain. I heaved painful breaths, bracing myself for the nullifying blow.

Will my life be over? Surely not to this prick!

"Revert to null, Famine." Aidoneaus raised his claymore blade high

above his head to end my life.

"No!" He cried out with disbelief at the longsword retracting from the fresh stab hole in his mid-section.

The claymore fell out of his hands; it disappeared upon impact to the floor. He stumbled about with shock, turned and gurgled with laughter at the sight of War.

"Yah talkin shit 'bout meh Baby Bro," War coolly said as he raised his light blue longsword and skillfully stab attacked Aidoneaus's stomach again.

"Jainkoaren eskuetan!" Aidoneaus's gurgling voice managed to spit out a spell.

He disappeared into a cloud of silver light that triggered a traumatic blast. The walls began to dissemble.

"Lita!" I heard Ryoko cry out.

I turned my head and saw her attending to Lita.

"Saku, how weh gonna get 'em out of 'ere?!" War called out.

Saku came up behind him. I noticed a key crystal in his hands.

"No one is in a position to walk." He began to panic as he glanced about the shaking walls that were dissembling at a fast rate.

"Weh just 'ave to protect 'em." War said.

Saku, Ryoko and War carefully grouped everyone together on the ground near the stillest wall. They stood over us to deflect flying bricks straying our way.

We held tight for a location change.

∞

Dull droning, black and white blurry blobs were the limits to my hearing and vision.

I felt too weighed down to move. The sensation of movement was there, but the feeling was too indistinct.

Famine... look... at... me.

Did someone call my name? Such a small voice; barely a whisper.

Famine...

No. It was the droning noise. Besides, I would never allow myself to be known by a filthy consequence.

F...

No. My name didn't begin with that letter.

"Of course not."

That voice! I know the sound of that voice!

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't Brother."

The droning noises pricked my head like a million tiny needles.

"Open your eyes, see me."

My eyes were already open. It was impossible to distinguish anything from the blurred blobs.

"Release the pain constricting your heart, then you can see."

The beating of my heart was literally thumping the hell out of my chest to make it ache all over, black and blue. If I could release myself from the pain, I would.

Et abiit dolore.

Ancient words flowed around my head to clear away the droning and restore my mind to a crisp and revitalized state. It softened my heart beats and soothed the pain in my chest.

"Is that better Brother?"

I blinked in an unlikely vision of a circular floor depicting a lotus flower in full bloom on still waters of a dark pond.

My body was lying within the center, reflecting my tired form. As I pushed myself, I smiled at the impression of water ripples around my hands. A coolness refreshed my flushed skin.

A familiar place.

"Brother."

The voice drew my attention toward the man standing on the opposite side of the floor that I sat on. Apart from the lotus floor, the area was a mass of gray space void of any characteristics.

"This place is?" My voice felt strange.

"All in good time, Brother."

I felt old familiar feelings of longing and desperation tug at my heart.

"Pesti, it's you, right?"

Pesti exhaled a disappointed sigh.

He stepped closer, so I could clearly distinguish his gray eyes and silver hair. It was him.

"It seems you're still seeing me with your worldly eyes. I suppose it can't be helped." Pesti's voice was expressionless.

"Where are you Pesti? Are you alright? I'm worried about you."

He sat down cross-legged before me, so we were facing each other. I mirrored his seated position, so we were at the same eye level.

"I am not Pesti, but I am the personification of pestilence." He answered.

"I don't understand." Frustration was aggravating the nerves of my hands, neck and sinus area.

"Your body is testing the limits of your will, I see."

Pesti continued to face me without expression.

"Before you leave this place, I'll give you my name, but you must promise to only say it when you see my body again," said Pesti, his voice becoming distant.

"Pesti?"

"That name is my mask. My real name is who I am," Pesti answered.

He leaned in close, so his dainty mouth was almost pressed to my ear.

When he told me his true name, my body relived every single sensation and emotion I had experience with the Pesti I know.

"Now you know." His voice left my ears.

I hiccuped, swallowing my tears and wiping my dirtied face clean with my sleeves.

"Brother. The Power of Preservation will not be enough to reset the false destiny you are facing. You will need some of your own," said Pesti when he resumed his cross-leg position. "This is going to hurt, sorry."

"By thy light of the Chiorning Star Ral, I evoke thee Powers of Clarity, Purpose, Preservation and Null!" Pesti's commanding voice saturated the air.

I felt his voice attack every part of my body like it was carrying needles. I was pin-pricked a zillion times, being torn apart. It hurt to breathe, to think, feel.

"I evoke thy Power of Null. Return thy power thoust hold to thee!"

My eyes were forced open.

I saw Gat Shiem's lifetime from conception, to its building stages and the day it was destroyed. Every single life form and creature who moved, lived and left that place, I felt them all until I knew them personally.

It became clear that my power had been there from the start. The

Power of Null had made Gat Shiem and saw to its destruction.

Naturally, my body was resisting to accept the fact with pain.

Pesti held out a glowing white ice cube in his hand before me. "You've glimpsed history that contained your power. Now that this course of history is complete, the power can be yours again."

"Don't want it." I choked back my tears.

"You have to take it for Sol's future. Gat Shiem will be forgotten if you do not take back this power." Pesti's voice was expressionless as usual.

"This's low, even for you Pesti. The lowest point of whatever I am." I sobbed.

I faced his unwavering gray eyes. "I want my brother back, whatever you are. You can call yourself what you want, I want him back!"

"I am him. Do not deny what you know in your heart is true, what you know this place to be. We all have one like it, the four of us."

Pesti held out the glowing cube under my nose. "Now take it!"

I grabbed the cube from his hands and braced myself for another painful experience; waited for a few moments, but nothing came. I looked at my hands and saw that the cube was gone. More accurately to say, it had melted into my hands.

A white aura shone around my body. I felt present time tingling my fingertips.

"Good. You're ready to go back to your worldly life now."

I frowned, perplexed.

"Do well - Onii-san." Pesti's face lifted in a smile for the first time.

My vision was losing focus again, reverting to the black and white obscure blobs.

"No wait! Pesti where are you?! You have to tell me where you are?!"

I felt his image; gray space and the lotus flower floor, leave my mind.

"Damn it! Don't do this to me a second time! PESTI!"

Worldly darkness reclaimed my senses. His ego was gone. Soon, so was the sensation and vividness of being there. Only a lingering impression remained as a souvenir of the visit.

Do I have to open my eyes?

I reluctantly answered my own question when my eyes fluttered open, and I saw reality around me again.

The Power of Null

"Too cute for words."

"What's cute? One of them's a spider."

"Temporarily, silly. Don't you think seeing the three brothers snuggled up in sleep like this is adorable?"

"Creepy. I wouldn't hug your arm in my sleep."

"Liar. You held my hand when we slept."

"Did not."

"Did to."

"Um, you know I'm awake, I can hear you." I groaned.

My eyes fluttered open to the sight of a lantern room.

How?

"Think it was perchance of your dumb luck that got us out of a pinch." Wilfred's voice interrupted the quiet of my left ear.

"Really?" I sat up and saw him and Lita next to me.

Their wounds were either healed or covered with a salving wet patch.

I glanced around and noticed Forneas working on Brystagg's back. Lyra sat against the wall, lost in her own thoughts. Buru was asleep, his arm connected to a saline drip and salving patches over most of his wounds. Colin was sitting next to Wilfred with a weird smile on his face.

"Yah awake Famisto." War yawned, letting go of my arm to sit up.

He grumbled when I had almost knocked him back down with a bear hug.

"Too cute." Lita whispered behind her hand that covered her mouth.

"Shuddup." War and I said in unison, which made matters worse.

She squealed with girly delight.

I released War with a sigh.

"She's a bizarre one, this girl." Death's voice chased away the remaining grogginess from my mind.

"Me don't like females but me like this Freend." Small Cap's friendly

voice was soothing.

I saw his spider body perched on my shoulder.

"I'm relieved to see you both well." I gently patted the tiny cap-tuft on his head.

"How'd we get here?" I asked as I tried to form an answer.

I remembered seeing the walls and floors reassembling around us, then my memory went blank.

Wilfred filled in the blanks.

Basically, I had passed out from blood loss due to the slash wound on my arm. The rebuilding black and red mortar was pushing the floor area we sat on upwards until we were almost in reach of a pivot landing.

Saku had used his force magic to push us onto the landing before the tunnel entrance could move us away.

War had carried me and Lita (who had also been unconscious) to the landing's entrance corridor. Saku and Ryoko were able to assist the others off the platform in the nick of time.

The landing was soon destroyed by a mighty crash of tunnel debris that had broken it to pieces. We were in for more luck, when the landing corridor was for the medical units in the South Wing.

"Where's Saku and Ryoko?" I asked and was answered with a brief quake and sounds of distant fighting.

"They're fighting to hold back the escaping prisoners and demons in the South and West Wings with Sergeant Jensen and the rest of the Orion Squad." Forneas answered in his usual machine-friendly voice. His metal mouse head twitched a forced smile.

I glanced at Lyra with a frown.

Ryoko would have known who she was. Why didn't Lyra stop her from going? Surely, she knew that it could be the last time she saw her daughter alive.

"What's with your burning stare?" Lyra nonchalantly asked me.

"Ryoko's your daughter, you know. Aren't you worried?" I answered with the same tone of voice.

"I know who she is. Of course, I'm worried. Every day I worry about her. Now I know she's been capable of looking after herself. She can get the job done. She's a knight, isn't she?" Her eyes darted to Lita.

She smirked. "I figured out why you were so sweet on me earlier."

Lita gulped nervously.

"Relax girl. I'm not going to be that interfering mother-in-law."

Lyra groaned when she gingerly stood and made her way to our side. She sat down next to Lita.

"I didn't think Ryoko would swing that way. Still, she's picked well." Lyra's smile became welcoming. "Please continue to take care of my daughter."

"Yes." Lita returned her smile.

"Welcome to the family, I guess." Wilfred interrupted the moment and suffered a finger flick to his forehead for it.

"Don't interrupt the mood, Shorty." Lyra grumbled.

"Shorty?! I'm taller than Lita." He justified with reasons of his and Lita's disparate heights.

"Pfft." Lyra chuckled.

She wrapped her arms around both of them. "You kids are adorable."

"Ugh!" Wilfred groaned as he wiggled out of her hug.

He smoothed down his navy vest and hair, realigned his round glasses and the rest of his image back to being stoic.

"Can we get to the Lotus Bridge from here?" Brystagg's voice broke through the light conversation.

"Normally, yes. However, it's not where it should be. It may have been destroyed." Wilfred's voice was calm, but the reflected light on his irises revealed his fear.

"No. It's in a dimension slip twenty years in our past, on this very day." I corrected Wilfred's assumptions.

"Dimension Slip. Wow, that's some dedication," he muttered to himself.

"I think I know of that hiruda causing all of this. I'm hoping I'm wrong, but if it's who I think it is, stopping this demon would be next to impossible." Brystagg groaned as he pushed himself up and out of Forneas's back massage.

"That thing that stole Death's body, you know it?"

Brystagg sighed. "Its name is Moralta. It was once a he. Symian Moralta used to be a human magis specialist on various force magic skills. His notable claim to fame was his renowned knowledge and obsession with Zyon."

He further explained on Moralta's backstory.

The man was born a magical genius to extremely affluent parents who had business connections with Brystagg's parents.

This genius was known for his strong psychic abilities and cunning charm, which had won him popularity with his peers. His wealthy status had also placed him in a favorable eye of his community.

In short, he was heavily admired. A boy who could do no wrong, so got way with his wrong doing. It seemed that admiration got to his head by the time he had come of age at fifteen.

He became obsessed with gathering knowledge of Zyon (the demon world) and anything on ancient power. Testing everything, he had learned on poor and unfortunate creatures.

"When I was a student in the Caldera Academy, I heard a lot of rumors about girls he had dated being unwitting test subjects. Of course, I never saw any of those girls. He was careful to practice on ones that no one would miss." Brystagg's voice trembled.

The rumors must have been horrific to make his voice quiver. He didn't elaborate. I was glad for it.

Brystagg continued, telling of Moralta's first public achievement at the age of twenty. His Zyon Demonica dissertations were groundbreaking. He had discovered evidence of the Demonica magic book, which was Zyon's form of The Sacred Word.

"The foundation practices for necromancy is said to have originated from Moralta." Death's voice soberly interrupted my listening.

"Do you know of him Death?" I asked aloud.

"Of him, yes. He's listed as a contributor for anti-moral practices within the Magism Code of Conduct and Consequence," Death answered.

"An abridged version told of Moralta's obsession with demonic power granting immortality after his mother had passed away. A lot of conservative scholars disagreed on his views, naturally, and reported him to be nothing more than a power thirsty boy with a god complex."

I rephrased Death's comments for everyone else.

"Not good for us," said War.

"Yeah, we're dealing with a demon who has insights of a human being and knowledge of ages." Wilfred commented.

"He also has an agenda to become a god." Lita added.

"Now he's got a chance to be one." Lyra threw out with a troubled sigh.

The mood became pessimistic.

"Ha. Look at you lot with your stupid sad faces. If you could see yourselves in a mirror, you'd know what I'm on about." I said with as much of an upbeat voice as possible.

"Famine. We're dealing with a demon who has the power and human wisdom to destroy Hell's Labyrinth," said Lita.

"Destroy Hell's Labyrinth equal to destroying the world. Yes, yes, understand that we're up against a big six boss type with firepower, smarts and skills of an absolute genius to wipe humanity from the face of Sol anytime now." I recapped with perky enthusiasm.

"Oh, and we have no plan to counter-attack! Basically, we're totally screwed." I reassured everyone's jaw dropping shock with a cheesy grin.

"Whaddahell yah happy about yah git?!" War cursed as he whacked the back of my head.

"Well, it's better than being all gloomy and down in the dumps like you guys." I grumbled, rubbing the egg on my head.

"Besides, we have a trump card I don't think Mr. Moralta Hiruda is expecting." I smugly pointed to Small Cap.

"I think he'd be expecting me Famine. He's psychic remember." Death corrected my thinking.

"Semantics Death! The fact is, while we're all here healing up and talking, we have a chance to save the day." I cheered the gloomy faces before me.

I sighed with relief when I saw their earlier sadness transform into something of hope.

"Ha, good going kid!" Buru spoke for the first time.

I warmly greeted the minotaur who was able to sit up unassisted. He had recovered a lot of his health thanks to the healing potion from the drip.

"You're up Buru." Lyra coolly said, pretending not to care or be relieved. "Shut it Famine."

"I didn't say anything." I grinned at her endearment for the beast.

"Your goofy face says it all," she said, turning her conversation to

War. "How did you live with this nutjob?"

"Well..." War recounted a few stories that had lightened the mood.

Forneas added to the hilarity when he recounted my first, embarrassing, experience with the washlet basin. It was the clincher for roaring laughter.

"Yeah, yeah, butt in the air, very funny. Can we move on to pressing matters now? Like how we're going to get to and in that Lotus Bridge." I frowned with thought.

"I can help with that." Brystagg said and looked at Colin. "I need your bidea assistance."

Colin nodded with understanding. He signed that he could also call upon a spell in the light grimoire that could extrapolate an entry point to the bridge.

Brystagg talked through the plan of action we would take that had everyone nodding their heads.

"It's risky, but it's the best plan we have so far," he concluded.

Sounds of a fierce explosion and jarring vibrations stopped our conversations.

"Is everyone ready to move out?" Brystagg said after the floor had stopped trembling.

I smiled, nodding my head. It was a relief to see him take the lead.

Everyone confirmed with their own nods.

Forneas disconnected drips, redressed wounds, so they could last a lot longer, and handed everyone a round of pills to ease with the pain.

We rechecked our weapons, then stood to leave.

"May luck be on your side, my masters and mistresses," Forneas said.

I thought I saw a sad expression on his usually cheerful face. It was gone before I could be sure.

"Forneas. I'm the carrier of dumb luck. We're going to be fine." I reassured the animachine with a thumbs up.

"Of course, Master Famine." He acknowledged, in his typical friendly manner.

Expelling a deep breath, I followed the others out of the lantern room.

We were attacked as soon as we passed through the quarantine double doors of The South Wing Infirmary.

The greater infirmary had become a fighting zone with a squadron of stoic knights, in dark patchwork overcoats, ending demon threats and meeting the rush of crazed prisoners with swords, elemental spells, shrills and burning bullets.

I could use my guns again since the corridors weren't subject to change, but I was beginning to hate them. Their weight was becoming too much of a burden to carry. Especially that the targets could be human.

"Famine!" I heard Wilfred cry out. He waved me over to the corridor that he and Lita had cleared.

I stowed the guns and sprinted behind their lead, hoping we were going in the right direction to the pivot landing area where the Lotus Bridge should be.

"Duck!"

My body involuntarily obeyed Brystagg's command, which saw my head stay attached to my neck.

I gulped when a flying rat demon (that had swooped over my head earlier) was gearing up for another pass for our heads.

Its sharp talon feet moved in rapid circles to form a spinning blade. It let out a high pitch screech as it dived for us.

From the corner of my eye, I spied another rat demon making the same pass from behind us.

I flipped open the portspell and pointed it at the demon before me. I shouted the spell that displaced it into the path of its kind. No one stopped to examine the rat demon dissections.

We continued our sprints through the white corridors, fending off demon and human attacks we encountered.

Eventually our plight led to a black wall corridor of a pivot landing. At the landing's entrance was vast gray space and sparking clouds where a hexagon platform should be.

A mob of flying rat demons were screeching up the corridor behind us.

"Time to close door," Lyra said when she called upon a spell to block the corridor behind us with obsidian.

"What now?" War frantically stared about the gray space.

Colin stepped forward and called upon his bidea magic.

Rings of blue light rippled through the gray space, pushing aside

some clouds to reveal a pivot landing beneath us. There was only one way we could reach the landing, by jumping.

"That's the entry point?" I pointed to the far-off hexagon platform.

By sight, I worked out that it would require a long run-off to make it. Our space was only so much, not adequate for a decent take-off.

Jumping wasn't the immediate problem.

More winged demons were flying toward us from opposite pivot entrances in the distance ahead.

I groaned when I spied figures of men riding some of them.

"Well, that's bloody great!" I cursed aloud.

It wouldn't be long before we were demon food.

Wilfred holstered his guns and pulled out a pair of silver-glass rings linked by a gold chain. Was he going to wed one of them?

He placed them on his middle and third fingers, raised his arms and made the motion of pulling back an arrow and knocking it to a bow.

My eyes widen with wonder, when three arrows were released from his hands when his fingers had released their position. He repeated the process, knocking out the close-range attackers shrieking for us.

Lita placed a set of the same rings on her fingers and sent silver-glass arrows flying at oncoming targets.

Both were, so far, knocking out threats before they could reach us.

"We'll keep the demons at bay. You get to that entry point," she coolly said, whilst not keeping her eye off the oncoming attackers, which were throwing lightening at us.

A bolt had struck her supporting arm. She cursed, shook off the pain and continued firing.

"Famine. Don't miss that landing." She threw over her shoulder as she released another round of arrows to take out scaly winged lizards.

I reassured her fears with a nod.

"Buru and I will help the twins." Lyra declared.

She unfolded her fans to call out her sparrows and set them on a fiery path to counter the demons in the air.

Buru confirmed his agreement by pulling off chunks from the wall. He used elemental magic to transform them to boulders, which he hurled at oncoming attackers to knock them down.

More flying demons joined their flanks. Reinforcements had been summoned. The gray space was crowded with a flying army headed for

us.

I looked to Brystagg who gave me a signal for the jump, then to War who was setting up a vantage point for close range attacks.

"War?"

"Famisto, go get our bro."

I frowned, his eyes were telling me he knew he couldn't step foot on that landing. How did he know?

"But?!" I began to argue. I hated the idea of being separated from him again.

"Dun make meh smack yah arse off dis rock!" War vehemently cussed.

Fireballs scorched the rock next to us. Time was up. I had to make the jump.

"Let's go!" Brystagg yelled.

He grabbed my arm and hauled me into a jump for the entry point platform.

We fell through the gray space at speeds faster than sound.

"Ouch!" I cursed, winching at the pain I felt to my shoulders and all over.

Although I had hit the pivot landing rather hard, surprisingly, I didn't suffer any broken bones.

"Both okay?" Brystagg whispered when he rose to his feet.

I nodded. Colin and I helped each other to our feet.

We faced empty space. Was this really the place to the Lotus Bridge?

"You must stay absolutely still. The spell I will call upon breaches both time and space." Colin soberly signed.

I translated for Brystagg's benefit.

We stood at the center of the platform, ignoring the fighting going on above us. Colin called upon his powers of the Light Grimoire through his fob watch.

His hands drew out the spell called the Unbound Reunion. Elongated fingers manipulated light and shadows, drawing an outline of another platform around us. The emptiness was soon replaced with the setting of the Lotus Bridge.

Colin finished off the spell. We were facing the gold coin olive tree.

"Bravo! Well done, good chaps!" Possessed Death overzealously clapped as he greeted us from the other side of the platform.

"I must say I underestimated the odds of seeing you back here. Then again, that Hades Lion had mentioned it could happen."

Icy hands grabbed our limbs to constrict our movements. My nose got a whiff of stinky fudge.

"Urrea piztu!" He cheerfully cried out.

Brystagg swiftly counteracted the demon's spell.

"Gaah! Fine." Possessed Death snarled. He assumed a moment to recompose himself. "Fine. No magic."

"Maitasunean eta grazian, itzuli zure tokira," said Brystagg.

Icy hands released our limbs with sighed thanks. The fudge stench was gone, the atmosphere felt warm and free from ghostly energies.

"An insurance." He smugly declared.

"Brystagg De Marc Aueralius. My you are a sight for sore eyes." Possessed Death sighed, like he had cooled his temper. "Or is it, sore eyes for no sight?"

"Still the same deranged prat Moralta." Brystagg insulted Possessed Death.

I gulped when I saw the hiruda's face flinch with anger. A genuine sign of emotion.

"So you figured me out. I guess congratulations are in order." The earlier signs of emotion were replaced with clever cockiness.

He magically called upon a stool from air and took a seat. So much for no more magic.

"Whether you know of me, my plans, it doesn't matter. I have this world in my hands now."

"Ea incipit." Moralta spoke his spell with a creepy smile and gestured for us to look up.

I carefully glanced up and saw Trix and Leinard bound by gold coin links within the tree, as I had seen them in Delphi's vision. They were unconscious, positioned next to each other. Leinard's colonel cap and sword were missing. Trix's overcoat was removed, along with his weapons. Threads of light were wrapped around their limbs to keep them upright and entrapped within the trunk of the olive tree. Trix was still wearing his mapglass, which had tiny threads of light streaming out of the lens and touching on each spinning gold coin.

Footsteps approached my back, followed by the sounds of steel clashing. I saw Colin's short swords blocking Aidoneus's blade attack.

"How? War ran you through with his sword." I moved away from their swordplay.

"A masterpiece. I found him chipping away the walls of the labyrinth. A lost and lonely boy some years back. So, I empowered him to find his way." Moralta smirked with false admiration.

Colin and Aidoneus continued to fight as Moralta talked, like they were part of a demonstration for businessmen.

"Don't you think he's wonderful? My dream of the super elite race. Instantly regenerating, never needing to eat, sleep and breathe. Filled with the power of Zyon. Aidoneus is almost the perfect specimen of our next generation, not quite there yet."

Moralta was talking crazily, but whilst he did so, it was giving me time to find a way to Leinard and Trix.

My luck ran out.

Aidoneus had successfully disarmed Colin and stabbed his stomach.

"Revenge," he said with an expressionless voice.

Colin crumpled to the ground and became still. Blood pooled around him.

"Colin!" I cried out, as I ran to him.

Aidoneus caught my arms before I could attend to him. He threw me to the other side of the platform.

"Even playing field. Let's spar, shall we?" Moralta pulled out a silver-glass longsword from air.

Brystagg magically revealed his own. "You'll pay for all of this. I'll ensure it."

"Bold words from a powerless man. I'll give you the chance, Sire." Moralta started his attack.

"Let's have a chat." Aidoneus cracked his neck as he hauled me to my feet and rapidly punched my stomach. "I'll let my fists do the rest of the talking."

I spat blood in his eyes. My fingers fumbled in the belt pouch for the portspell and flipped it open.

Aidoneus was thrown to the other end of the platform. I rebalanced myself for his counter-attack.

Brystagg and I found ourselves locked in a fight for our lives.

The time to save the world was ticking away.

"Please show us what you saw back at Gat Shiem Small Cap. It's

important. Quickly now." Death kindly asked the spider, drawing my thoughts towards their conversation.

"Small Cap, what'd you see? Hang on!" I telepathically asked whilst trying not to suffer hits from Aidoneus's attacks.

I sensed the spider's uncertainty for a starting point.

"Begin from where you felt things were wrong." Death gently coaxed him.

"Okay Freends." Small Cap exhaled deeply.

My mind watched events that had been troubling him since we had left Gat Shiem, but he wasn't able to put perspective on them until now. I was doing my damnedest to concentrate on my fight in the process.

I revisited Gat Shiem from Small Cap's memory.

Seeing from his perspective, I was...

Scurrying through the damp foliage and bushes of the glen near the moonstone walls close to the Torii, avoiding webs and insects bigger than myself. I had managed to find tasty snacks in the bushes near the entrance. The place the two-legs called a Torii had the fattest worms.

I couldn't stay in the bushes for long. There were too many bigger insects that would have me for breakfast. I had to find a new home since I had been kicked out of my old one.

It had taken me too long to recover from my injury. The females had tried to eat me when I had returned. The old males chased me out. A merciful eviction. All the other choice barks were full, and to try to seek shelter was suicidal. I decided to look for Freend.

I hurried under some fallen foliage near familiar bushes close to the Torii's posts. Strange voices from two-legs caught my interest. Two of them were talking to Freend's nestmate, the one with bright eyes and shiny hair the color of the moon.

"Thank you for the information your Shuso has asked you to provide us," said a deep voice, giving off unnatural vibrations like a web-spinners. "We have some further details we need to confirm."

I pushed my head out of a pile of leaves and watched them.

"Details? But you only needed to know about the walls, right? I'm not permitted to provide further explanations, nor would I be qualified. If you need magical details, you may discuss matters with our guardian." The tones of Freend Nestmate's voice were harsh. He was

short of breath. He was angry?

"Even if it meant saving the life of your favorite brother from an imminent threat?" The two-leg's voice was too smooth.

I scurried up a tree behind the strange two-legs to get a better look.

One of them was almost hidden in dark colors, with a thin web covering his eyes. The other had his head covered with a two-leg's hat. He wore strange cloth that carried an outline of red.

"What? Are you threatening us?" Freend Nestmate's voice let out a stronger vibration and harsher tone that raised my hairs. He was angry, like those females that had wanted to eat me.

"As our thanks for your information, make sure you count to fifty when the day becomes night, and you hear the first blast. If you want your brother to live, be gone by then."

The two-leg's tones made me shiver. I was worried about freend's nestmate.

"You are threatening us? I will alert Shuso!"

The bright flash of yellow around Freend's nestmate body had startled me. He turned to run, but his arm was caught by the two-leg's wearing dark colors.

"Go ahead, it won't make a difference, but I owe a favor to the family you've forgotten. With this, the cards are drawn even," said the two-legs with the hat.

Freend's nestmate exhaled a deep breath to calm down. "I will tell Shuso about this conversation. You will leave this place or be forced to so."

"Of course, we mean no harm, Pestilence," said the two-legs. "Thank you for your assistance once again."

Freend's nestmate was released. The two-legs moved away from him. I watched their bodies walk beyond the Torii and out of sight with a sigh of relief.

"What's that all about? What is Shuso thinking? Must tell him." Freend's nestmate blew aside some nettle leaves as he sprinted up the slope toward a big rock tower.

"Goddamn it! Can't you give a time-out?!" I shouted, dodging a claymore swipe to my head.

"This happened? Why didn't you say anything earlier?" I continued

my conversation with Small Cap and Death.

"Also," Small Cap added.

I saw Adams-san and a man I hadn't seen before, talking before the opening of the sack we had been dumped in. We had traveled in darkness for a long time, but Small Cap could tell that we had crossed a river, over rocky terrain, through mountain paths and underground to reach the entrance of an iron wall. Skrit surrounded the sack. I was able to see the face of Aidoneus and the back of an Evadale Knight with black, spiky hair. Their images were cut off when the sack's drawstring was pulled closed.

"Everything has been cleverly orchestrated." Death concluded.

"To this very moment? HELL!" I yelped as I dived and did a body roll to avoid another lethal blow.

Multitasking was taxing my energies.

"Seems so. It means, they were counting on you being in the Evadale Knight's care, to rescue War, and use me to carry out events leading up to this very moment." Death concluded.

"Eat lead, you freak face!" I shouted to Aidoneus, firing rounds of bullets that he annoyingly dodged with great skill.

"So, you were saying, they were counting on you to have the Power of Preservation. Why? I don't get the part I play in all... hang on." I ducked and fell backwards to avoid another blow.

"Godamnit!" I cursed at the nasty gash to my arm that ended my gunslinging chances.

I replaced my guns with the portspell.

"As I was saying, why do any of this, keep me alive, throw me twenty years into the past?"

"Because you could bring me back! Something bothered me when I was linked to that Banshee. I don't recall being gifted. Rather, I was taken. Moralta may have possession of my body, it doesn't carry the perspective knowledge pertaining to tsazcuths. That's what he's trying to do here!" Death continued.

I continued fighting off Aidoneus's attacks, who was oblivious to my conversation with my brother. The freak's red eyes were totally fixed on me, not aware of another presence dragged about our fight.

"Aah! I get it!" I muttered.

Everything became clear. I felt certain about our fighting chance since I had realized our enemy's mistake. I needed to get to Colin and heal him up.

"Small Cap, Death. Do you think you can nudge a few gold coins off their place?"

"Nudge?" Death questioned.

"The bottom ones on the side opposite Colin will do. Make sure you do it when I'm in your line of sight. Also, make sure you are not seen. I'm counting on you."

"We're on it!"

Small Cap escaped the belt pouch when I did a body roll to hide his presence from the hiruda and the X-man freak. He went about his task and I went about mine.

It was time to turn the tables.

The platform's floor vibrated and glowed with intense white light. It was a reaction to the fight between Moralta and Brystagg, which had turned magical.

Moralta called upon water spells that chilled the air as it formed ice balls to hurl at the high prince. The chilled atmosphere became heated from the flames Brystagg had thrown back in retaliation. They were stirring a magical, hot and cold, dance within the air.

"I am absolutely livid! How dare that thing use elemental magic so disrespectfully in my body! He's violating the water bound codes!" Death complained.

I sensed Small Cap's body twitching at the top of my belt pouch.

"He's a villain! Of course, he's gonna violate codes Death! Focus!"

I ducked and dived about the ground until I was on top of Colin's unconscious body. The gold coin tree was in my line of sight.

Small Cap crept out of the belt pouch and sprinted to the tree, disappearing behind a shield of twirling coins before the others had noticed.

"I'm gonna need you to see everything once you do this." I telepathically said to Death.

"Already aware. You can count on both of us," he reassured me, answering for Small Cap. "Hold that four-eyes tight. For god's sake, don't miss."

I gulped. He didn't have to spell that out. There was no way I was going to miss.

"Imma slash that pretty face of yours." Aidoneus gloated over my head with his claymore raised high for a brutal blow. "Your lover won't wanna see you."

"Lover?!" I blurted and cursed when my eyes reflectively glanced to Leinard.

"Knew it. You kept giving Sire glances. They do look alike." He moved away to point his claymore to Leinard's comatose face. "Wonder how he'd feel if I cut him?"

No, no, no! I cursed at my stupidity. I had to get his attention back.

"Famine, we need to trigger this now!" Death broke through my flustered thoughts.

Improvise.

"I hold the knowledge of the Light Grimoire." I hoped I had dangled the right bait. If my suspicions of his boyish thirst for knowledge were true. Those feelings were still strong within him.

"What?" The man's sinew legs took long strides towards me until his near skeletal black clad body was standing over me again. His oversized claymore was a tip away from my head.

"You lie! A dumb git like you won't hold such things."

"Got it in Minos. Was gifted by the Sol Mother, you can say." I faked a nonchalant voice.

"You went to see the Sol Mother, that's right." His claymore inched closer to my face. "Where is it?"

"Now." I gave Death the go and clung tight to Colin's body.

Small Cap-Death raced over the left ring of coins at the bottom of the tree; stopping their momentum and flicking them out of their position, so the tree was leaning. The platform gradually tilted, tipping the half containing Colin and myself towards the formless space below.

I steadied the portspell, holding both it and Colin's waist with my life.

"NO!" Aidoneus shouted as he lost his balance and stumbled off the platform.

His cursing voice became a whisper then silence as his body disappeared into the unknown depths.

Moralta and Brystagg had stopped fighting to hold onto something.

Colin and I slid off the floor into the gray space. Cold air and low whistling sounds brushed my face as we fell at great speeds.

"Come on!" I fumbled open the portspell whilst not letting go of Colin. His body was weighing me down. He was slipping out of my hold. We were falling like shooting bullets.

My breath got caught in my throat, my heart nearly stopped beating when the portspell slipped out of my fingers and landed onto Colin's pocket. I grabbed it and managed to flip it open, pointing the top part, so I saw my own face in the mirror and the bottom half toward the rapidly receding view of the platform's underside.

"Utz nazazu! Please!" I shouted. My voice was lost in the rush of winds.

Warm relief surged through my body when I felt my downward fall change direction. The underside of the Lotus Bridge platform sped into my view.

I thought back to Death's suspicions he had shared with me earlier when we had left the lantern room. When he saw the platform's image in my mind, he recalled blueprints of its architecture in an alchemist's guide he had read. It used minerals, wind and water to create electrical alternating and direct currents (whatever they were) to power things. The tree roots were links to a mineral power generator (thing) on the underside. He had concluded that the Lotus Bridge was not powered by magic but science. Since it was a creation of science, it would have a physical way to maintain it. Most likely on the underside of the platform directly beneath the tree.

Colin and I slammed into a steel grate scaffold that was suspended in midair beneath the Lotus Bridge platform. It was held in place by the olive tree's roots.

"Ugh," I winced at the grazes to my arms. My heart thumped wildly as a felt the knight stir about.

I gripped the steel mesh with all my might and hauled us onto the safer side. I instinctively clung tighter to Colin to push past all my aching pain. I'm sure War would have been impressed by my muscle strength, I know I was.

"Crap!" I cursed when the portspell slipped from my sweaty hands and fell into the unknown depths.

"You still with me, Famine!" Death's frantic voice made my head

ache.

"Kind of." I panted.

"Thank heavens." Death sighed with relief. "I'm going to balance the platform. Hang on tight!"

I swallowed my curse when the platform grunted and groaned as it tipped back into an upright and stable position.

My nose slammed into the platform's galvanized underside.

"I can't take any more pain!" I yelped with tears slipping from my eyes.

On the plus side, we were lying flat, face up, on the scaffold. Stable for now.

"You better come to, Captain." I pulled Colin's soporose face towards mine and kissed his lips to bring him around.

Colin returned to consciousness with a gasp for air. I laid back, staring up at galvanized steel.

Man, I was beat. Ever since that night of Gat Shiem's fire, I had been thrown into one situation after another. There was no time to rest, I had to get Death back into his body and see that the world was safe.

Especially now that it was clear of Moralta's intentions in transforming Hell's Labyrinth into a big tsazcuth portal to Zyon. In doing so, bringing more demons and that world's power into Sol.

I was still uncertain of Abraham Reiner and Aidoneus's visit to Gat Shiem. What were they really after that day? I probably should have asked that question before the freak fell. He may have slipped out something unintentionally.

"Ugh!" I smacked my head, hoping it would shake out smart thoughts. Nothing.

"Why're you beating yourself up? You figured out that horrible demon's plot for this place. Plus, your good fortune has brought us this far. Think better of yourself, Baby Brother." Death's smooth voice reassured my self-esteem.

My mind reeled back to the time before the attacks at Gat Shiem.

I never saw the visitors because I was with Bulldog at the pond. Since it was hidden from the Butsudan grounds, they would not have seen me either. It was close to evening when I had returned, so they were long gone. Pesti, in fact, no one had said anything about their visit. I was none the wiser.

Why didn't Pesti tell me about the visitors? What did Abraham mean when he said he had owed a favor to the family Pesti had forgotten? Sure, it was common knowledge to all the monks that the four of us weren't blood related. This knowledge coming out of Abraham's mouth made me squeamish.

"Whether people know of our birth family are irrelevant. The four of us were surrendered children to Gat Shiem. We became a family. That's all that matters. I must be attentive now. Moralta and Brystagg are fighting with magic again." Death voice went silent.

A light tap to my shoulder drew my attention back to Colin. I turned my head to him and noted his thankful smile.

"Are you okay?" I weakly signed.

My hands were a bit shaky from all the earlier heavy lifting and hauling.

"Fantastic." Colin signed with a cocky grin.

He's eyes looked up to the metal. They were squinting through his glasses at a symbol of a blossoming lotus flower stamped into the square panel that was within arm's reach.

He raised his arm, placed his palm on it, closed his eyes and became still like he was listening to the vibrations and sensations of the metal. An abrupt jolt made his hand recoil. He opened his eyes and faced me.

"This is the panel opening for the Lotus Core circuit board. It's the nervous system of the labyrinth, so controls everything," Colin signed.

"How'd you know this?"

"Anyone who wears a maplink knows. Why we should know is one of the unexplained facts, but I suspect it was a flaw in the bridge's design. Lucky for us," he answered and added a question.

"How did you know I was aware of this?"

"I didn't. I just hoped that since you were a Captain and the Light Grimoire, you'd know something useful," I causally signed back and coped a stinging finger flick to my forehead.

Looks like I had insulted the man, like I cared.

Shrill cries and a disturbance within the air reminded us of the battle occurring above us. We had no time to dawdle.

"Can you open the panel?" I asked

"And do what?"

"Reverse the dimension slip so the Lotus Bridge is back in the

correct time stream."

"I could, but fiddling with time is tricky, and dangerous, as you know. Then there's the interwork of a Lotus Core's..." Colin paused his explanation.

"Huh?! How did this knowledge come into my maplink?" He subconsciously signed out his surprise.

"Colin?" I prompted.

"The demon had used his own crystal for the dimension slip, right? It may be possible to use a similar method. I'd need zirconia or a similar crystal carrying residue of the correct time to lock on. Do you still have that key crystal I gave you?" Colin asked with surety.

I frowned. I didn't think that crystal would work, since it had been used in a spell and in another time period. I searched the junk in my memory, frustrated at the amount of useless trivia I had inside my head. An image of a sparkly marble surfaced to mind.

I carefully rummaged through the inside of my belt pouch, ignoring the strange emptiness I felt at not sensing Small Cap in there.

"I think I have something better." I whispered as I raised the Nikiaku Ball into Colin's view. "Will this do? It's from our time; been in my pouch since after my trip to a theater. Never touched it since then."

Colin responded with an overexcited grin and hand signage. "Wow, more than perfect for the job."

His hands gracefully danced around the pane's lotus symbol as he said a spell. The lotus briefly glowed. We heard four clicks triggered behind the panel.

He pressed the square panel, so it came loose, and pulled it off. We swapped objects; I took the metal from him, and he held the nikiaku ball tightly.

The core's inside was a sight to behold. It was a white space sectioned off in four distinct portions, further broken down by four diagonal lines to form eight pie sections.

Each section was lit up with tiny gold crystal dots that made constellation patterns and formed a series of gold paths that intertwined with each other. There were also some gray, green and red dots twinkling in random spots, spread out across the pie sections.

I gasped with awe when I saw the gold dots move around, disappear and reappear. Pushing the other colored dots into different areas or

making their lights turn off completely.

"They're the walls and everything moving about the labyrinth, right?"

Colin nodded his head. His face was scrunched up with a serious frown.

I followed his line of sight to the far left of the panel quadrants, noticing the excessive white space. A contradiction to the right margin area, which was almost off the edge. Some dots were dangling precariously. The top margin area was almost hidden from view, and the bottom was a lot of white space.

The sight made me gulp. The First Tier of Hell's Labyrinth was obviously out of kilter.

Colin's hand swiped over the pie section panels to change the colors of the crystal balls.

The white was replaced with blue, the red to black, gray to orange and green to pink. A different tier? Likely, since he repeated the hand motion two more times, causing the crystal balls to flash a different set of colors in different places.

He eventually returned to the first view with the abnormal quantity of space at the left and bottom margins. The constellation panel was inching dangerously out of existence to the right.

His hand danced around the left space with a graceful motion. A lotus flower outline was drawn to the surface with fine threads of gold light that connected to the tree roots dangling from the top. A circular blank space was at the flower's center.

He held the nikiaku ball to the center and said a spell. I was hoping his fancy magi-mojo was doing something.

I gasped when the ball was sucked into the lotus flower's center. The scaffold trembled beneath us. I caught Colin's hint to hold to something tight when he grabbed the panel from me and slammed it over the Lotus Core to seal it back up.

Winds whipped our skin. The air became charged with static to raise the tiny hairs on my arms and neck. My vision blurred. To be accurate, the vision before blurred and churned out of focus. Almost like we were imploding!

"What happened?!" Death shouted into my inner ear.

"Hang tight to your knickers. Shit, crap, Buddha protect us, think

we're gonna implode!" I mentally crapped myself.

"NO, WE'RE WARPING!" He yelped.

Howling and the clanging of metal assaulted our eardrums. I held the scaffold's rails with all my might and groaned when I felt Colin's weight pressed against my body as he clung to the same rails.

The howling was unbearable. Flashes of white were blinding my eyes.

In a blink, I was...

Sucked.

I felt I had been sucked and spat out. It took me a while to realize I was still lying on the steel grilled scaffold with Colin next to me.

He had already reclaimed his senses and was fiddling around with the Lotus Core. The square panel was off again.

"Did we do it?" I whispered, feeling uneasy with the silence surrounding us.

Colin let out a sigh. He didn't have to tell me of his disappointment.

"So, what now?" I gulped.

"Good news, we're vaguely inked to the correct time so the walls, in theory, should stop moving. Bad news, the Lotus Bridge is still out of alignment with the labyrinth," Colin signed.

"So what else is needed to pull the bridge back into working order?" I whispered, not about to give up.

"Sacral magic, but that would only achieve the demon's aims. The only other magic I know of that can reset and revert time slips without moving destiny is Null. I've never known anyone with that power. I don't even know if it's real or some magis fantasy." Colin gravely stated our options, that wasn't much.

"If we were to use sacral magic, not playing into the Hiruda's hands, that would restore the balance and working order, right?"

"Yes, the time part, but the destiny the Hiruda had set here will become permanent. It requires the Power of Preservation to isolate the fate, so it doesn't move when time is restored." Colin's explanation went right over my head.

He broke down his explanation with an analogy similar to the one Death had provided on time cells.

Basically, Sol was like a vinyl record, the Lotus Bridge a song on the record, time was a gramophone playing arm and needle, and destinies

were grooves on the record.

False destinies were light scratches over the record's grooves. If they were left unattended for too long, they would deepen and become a permanent destiny to overwrite the original score.

The Power of Preservation was like an eraser for those light scratches; re-coating the shellac so proper destiny could resume its natural course uninterrupted.

That was good for the destiny issue, but we also had a time problem to deal with. I was doing my best not to feel our situation hopeless.

"Brother. The Power of Preservation will not be enough to reset the false destiny you are facing..." I recalled Pesti's words from that vision. It was just a dream, right?

"Hey, what if we had both the Power of Preservation and Null. How would the work exactly?" I threw out.

Colin raised his brows. His expression was clearly telling me not to waste time on a ridiculous hypothesis.

Abrupt quaking to the scaffold reminded us of the villain topside. Colin resealed the Lotus Core. I understood that we had done all we could here. We needed to be topside as well.

I was worried Brystagg was facing his limit, and the Aueralius Brothers' chi was almost gone as they continued being the power boost for the bridge to keep it stable.

"So how do we get up there?" I glanced around, not seeing a way off this swinging and creaking scaffold. I gulped down a nervous breath and counted numbers to calm my rapid heartbeats.

Colin answered my question with a knowing smile and a tap of his fob watch.

Magic of course.

As I had guessed, Brystagg had reached his limit. He was on the ground, heaving for breath and bleeding out against the olive tree. Trix and Leinard were still suspended within the tree's center, meters away from Brystagg's head.

Colin had managed to move us onto the platform with stealth. Aside from Death, the other two were unaware of our presence.

I clicked my tongue at the sight of Moralta's gloating. Time to steady the turned table and fix this mess.

Feeling renewed strength in my hands, I unsheathed my guns and

shot a round at the floor near Moralta's feet.

Moralta threw his head back with laughter, he turned and faced me with a triumph expression.

"Thank goodness you're back. I can't handle this demon making a creep out of me any longer. A few times, my poor body almost lost a limb, and I saw how huge my backside is. Their fight has been horrible to watch!" Death sighed with relief.

"Freend back!" Small Cap greeted me excitedly. So much so, the gold coins that they hid behind tinkled.

I shot some bullets to the ground again to cover up the noise they had made. Moralta seemed none the wiser.

"Tell me what I had missed, quickly." I thought as my eyes kept a constant fix on the demon.

A recap of what had happened topside sped through my mind.

In short, the platform had been an arena for magical attacks that had violated countless magism codes. Brystagg had been struck by an ice attack right before the bridge had warped out of time. He received further damage when Moralta's longsword had slashed across his leg as soon as the bridge warped back in. Moralta's damages were minimal. It made me wonder if Brystagg had been holding back since the body belonged to Death. I admired him for it.

"You're like a cockroach, sucking the living joy out of everything." Moralta's expression sobered as he walked towards me. "I was having so much fun."

His sword disappeared. He called upon wind magic to throw us across the platform, so we were next to Brystagg.

"It's a shame my Aidoneus won't see home. Well, home will be with him soon. You had your chance my fair knights, you failed. Now, it's too late," said Moralta.

He wasn't boasting.

He said a spell that made a blue book appear and hover in the air before him. The juxtapositioner demon's blue book?

No way! It couldn't be; I shot that damn thing into implosion! Was it possible that the demon didn't implode, but had warped?

I stood to make a run for the book and close it. A wave of blue light knocked me back down. Hard light links bound my arms. A ring of light went around my neck. I yelped at the cuts I felt to my skin from the

ring's edges.

"I call upon the powers of the Dark Grimoire. Sol Tsazcuth is in motion. Come forth Infinite Denbora. Ekarri zion Zyon!" Moralta's voice echoed around the platform and inside my head.

His body danced around the book, stirring blue and white light about the air; making it churn and swirl until images of lands gradually formed to give the gray, formless space around us definition.

As the images swam into focus, my heart raced at the outlines of an impending invasion from a countless number of demons and unexplainable horrid creatures eager to wreak havoc on Sol.

I closed my eyes, trying not to panic. "Death, what do we do?"

"I don't know Famine. I don't know." Death's voice trembled.

The unexplainable creatures took form as they came further into focus. Soon a black, red and green inverted landscape became vivid around us.

Moralta was boosted with Zyon's dark power that crept across the platform, gradually changing the floors white to black.

"I'm scared Death."

I closed my eyes, waiting for the inevitable. I had tried everything and failed; couldn't even get to Pesti.

"Famine. The pink angels are smiling down on us from the sky. Looks like an eventful day awaits us." Shuso's voice entered my thoughts.

"Yah cannot fight the vapor trail once it cuts through the sky to bring down the rain."

"Mushin, Zanshin, Satori; it's what we learn, right?" The memory of a conversation with Pesti.

"Now I teach yah some ways to Mushin." Bulldog's wise voice answered my fears.

"Mushin." I slowly exhaled, feeling my resolve to fight for Sol.

I opened my eyes to the sight of demonic chaos circling about the platform.

I pushed past my pain and clumsily rose to my feet. Cutting pain forced tears out of my eyes, but I continued to ignore my discomfort and agony.

Howling, jeering and shrill cries in the air became louder, charged with a bloodthirsty excitement.

"F-Famine, don't. P-Please. He's too... powerful." Brystagg huffed,

exhausted.

"Lyra is waiting for your return. Return you to her, I will." I stepped forward, cautiously, barely feeling my feet.

"Why yah fear?" Bulldog's question come to mind.

"I'm scared?" I had naively answered.

"Wrong. It's 'cause yah heart is not beating dah same as yah mind. To reach Mushin, yah mind and heart must be one. Then yah can be still. When yah still, yah mind can break free from thinking..."

I understand.

I stood in the middle between Moralta and my friends. Closed my eyes and moved my thoughts with my feelings. Slowing my heart beats, in turn slowing my thoughts until all my senses were merged into silence and a stillness. A third eye cakra opened within me, showing me the entire view of the Lotus Bridge in my mind.

The waiting demons were only looking into Sol like kids pressing their faces to a window. A layer of chiorntex power kept them from crossing over. Moralta's dark grimoire spell was unable to remove it from the tsazcuth portal.

I sniffed the air and sensed that the spell Moralta had used was a watered-down copy - a fake. Of course, he was only able to use an impression, since the actual grimoire was not a book.

The power that seemed to be seeping from Zyon was actually accumulative energies from the demons within Hell's Labyrinth. Moralta had merely called on these with his spell. Sol was still closed off. Moralta was still a student of magic; a bad one at that. This bad student had neglected to include a core element to his Zyon Portal plans - me.

It was no dream. Pesti did hand me a piece of the Power of Null. I felt it restore my pain and break my binds until they no longer existed. Power tingled the tips of my fingers. It was charged with the love I held in my heart for my family and friends.

"You know why I was named Famine? Because I starve men like you from power, you can't fulfil your dark desires." My eyes opened to Moralta's stolen blue set. He was doing his best not to look scared.

"So many mistakes, Magis. You need to go back to school." I took a few testing steps toward him.

"How? You, the binds, how?" He fumbled as he stepped back.

Moralta frantically muttered spells to call upon shadow puppets to the bridge.

There wasn't enough light to carry the strength of their presence. They faced implosion by the remaining shrills in my pouch, or were shot into non-existence.

I dodged and danced ice balls, fireballs and strong winds. I was moving without realizing, using my focus in stopping Moralta to progress my advances.

I felt the Power of Null in my heart. It was ready.

"Non revertetur!" I shouted, aimed my guns at the blue book and fired.

The book burned into an intense blue and pure white before it imploded into glitter. The platform quaked fiercely, knocking Moralta to the ground.

A chance.

"Death - leap for me!" I shouted to him and looked at Brystagg. "Your sword."

I sheathed my guns. Brystagg mustered all his strength to throw me his sword that I caught in midair.

"I'll set this right."

REVERTI! I shouted when I felt Small Cap on my shoulder, and stabbed Moralta in the heart.

"NO! This... can't... be..." Moralta expelled his last breath from Death's body.

I quickly retracted the sword and placed my hand over the wound. Closed my eyes and completed the rest of the spell. "Et reversus est dominus."

I dropped the sword, placed my other hand over Small Cap. With deliberate timing, I slowly retracted my hand from the heart whilst moving my other hand, off Small Cap, towards it. Orange light was pulled from the heart; white light was returned to it.

Small Cap collapsed to unconsciousness when the lights had faded.

"I'm... back?" Death exhaled with his own mouth. His hands patting down his chest for the wound that should be there. He gulped in a few breaths to test his lungs, feeling the area of his heart, and shook his head with disbelief.

I glanced to my left and saw Moralta's true form. It was a cloud of

orange light, barely a human ghost. The thought of Colin's key crystal came to mind. I retrieved it and held it before the demon.

I looked at Colin and sighed with relief when I saw that the surrounding binds were gone. Since Moralta was no longer in a body, his power was too weak to keep a hold over the knights.

"Colin, call upon the Ego Port or whatever spell to trap this thing." I commanded the captain and smirked at his annoyed expression.

The orange cloud fluttered about the platform, flying around for an escape. Brystagg had recovered enough energy to contain it within a wind spell.

Colin did his graceful, magnificent, dance to call upon the Light Grimoire and evoke a trapping spell.

I felt Moralta's cries of disbelief and angst as his form was sucked into the crystal. Imprisoned again.

My body was yanked into Death's proud and grateful hug.

"Thank you. Thank you - thank you." Death cried tears of joy.

"We still have the waiting Zyon invasion to sort out and my boys to save." Brystagg stoically reminded us as he rose to his feet.

I saw that most of his wounds were healed, but looking crusty in some places; definitely a hira.

We approached the gold coin olive tree and stared at Trix and Leinard still suspended within it. Their bodies had turned, so their backs were pressed against each other, and we saw their side profiles. I didn't know where to take this as a good or bad sign.

Either way, it was now for the hard part.

"Small Cap, you still with me!" I called out to my friend on my shoulder.

My heart raced with anticipation.

"Freend? Is Nestmate Freend okay?" His small voice came through.

"Thank heavens!" I sighed with relief. "He's fine, but you should rest. You saved us Small Cap. I'm proud of you."

I gently placed the spider back into the belt pouch.

"Good. Me sleep now, Freend." He yawned, got cozy and eased into a peaceful sleep.

"Sleep well." I warmly smiled at Small Cap's slumbering form.

Penetrating stares compelled me to look at the others with a dubious expression.

"What?"

"You, I'm in my body!" Death frowned.

"I know, you're looking, um, human."

"No, that's not what I mean. How did you do this? Wait!" He became flustered as he tried to determine the reason behind the magical miracle. "I'm proud, grateful, but very confused. You've never had magic, let alone of this ability—"

Death shook off the rest of his words to silence.

"What did you mean when you said Moralta made mistakes?" Brystagg pushed in with his burning question.

I surveyed the increasing mass of Zyon residents eager to tour Sol's bountiful pleasures.

A lot of the agitated winged reptilians, flaming humanoids with two-heads and the shrouded human types were constantly bombarding Sol's protective layer with all forms of magical attacks. For now, the layer was able to diffuse their efforts with gray electrostatic energy and hide part of their images behind gray clouds.

We had some respite.

"Death, you said the banshee had taken you. I don't think you were

wrong," I said to him.

Death raised one of his brows with a strange expression.

"I think Moralta abandoned you, not realizing your immediate potential. That was his mistake," I blatantly explained.

He furrowed his brows.

I further explained on my hypothesis.

Moralta was used to living off the memories and magic a body held without the original ego. So, was probably under an assumption that he only needed Death's body for the alchemy knowledge it preserved. He was not aware of Death being the holder of the Power of Preservation, nor holding any other power he'd need later. How could he? This fact was only known when it was revealed in Minos.

Why was Death's ego linked to a banshee? His ego was powerful enough to attract interest from the redback spider. I suspected Moralta had left Death's ego behind when he was escaping the banshee, which had traversed into a tunnel with a time link to twenty years in the past thanks to the residual magic of the dimension slip.

Another mistake was when I rescued War. The juxtapositioner demon had been extracting knowledge of the Dark Grimoire from War's mind, with an impression that he was the closest thing to the library itself given his image bound memory. The demons didn't consider the fact that the grimoire was not a book. Knowing a spell was different to being able to apply it successfully. Moralta was only able to achieve a carbon copy effort.

"I'm impressed." Brystagg flashed a lopsided smile; a resemblance to Trix.

"It's just a theory." I failed to hold back my smug smile at feeling clever.

"That's a clever hypothesis, Baby Brother." Death praised me. He was still looking confused.

Colin reminded us of Trix and Leinard still withering within the gold coin tree. I groaned when I spied familiar links of blue light near the backs of the brothers.

"Ego links," Colin signed. "Of a sophisticated level, too. Breaking these won't be easy."

"I know," I groaned again and heard Death gasp.

"I'm remembering that numbing heartache." He shuddered at the

sight of the links.

I held his trembling hand to keep it steady.

Brystagg cursed when his hand suffered a temporary burn from the gold light from the gold coin olive tree. Colin did the same thing and copped a painful burn.

"You were able to come and go unharmed." I faced Death.

Death placed his hand inside the tree without any problems.

"What does that mean?!" I frowned.

He let out a short breath and stepped into the tree's gold light trunk before The Aueralius Brothers, being careful not to disrupt any of the spinning coins.

He held their ankles. "No idea what I'm doing, but try to enter the light now."

I tested a pinky finger, drenching it in gold light. I felt warm and calm. I peered at what was keeping Leinard suspended within the tree's trunk. Fine blue lines were wrapped around various areas of his arms, legs and torso. A strong blue chain was protruding from his back; parts of it running into Trix's.

What had these brothers experienced that kept them in a vegetated bind to the Lotus Bridge? How many were their regrets?

"I'll continue to act as the insulator. Please, don't take too long." Death gulped with beads of sweat trickling his face and down his neck. His skin was flushed.

"Break Leinard free, I'll work on Trent." Brystagg ordered me over his shoulder. He was facing Trix.

The Wisteria Garden Squad Captain had lost muscle tone in his arms, his cheeks were slightly sunken.

Colin explained that the gold coin tree was the primary energy core that powered data feeds to maplinks and controlled the tunnels' direction and movements. It usually didn't require an extra battery to run, but because of the abnormal amount of pressure it used to change the labyrinth's geography in a short span, it was draining the brothers' chi to function.

Death was able to slow down the direct currents that relied on Trix and Leinard. I wondered if it was by use of his new power.

"Wait, why do you think I could break the Colonel free?" I blurted to Brystagg.

"You love him, don't you?" Brystagg answered.

"Heck no!" My voice and mouth reacted. "I m-mean, not in a perverted way, I mean..."

I glanced at Colin and groaned at his cheesy smirk.

Brystagg's eyes narrowed.

"Fine, don't give me the small-eyes, Sire." I sighed.

I faced Leinard who appeared as a sleeping angel. He, too, had lost muscle tone, making him rack-thin and almost scrawny. I felt angry at seeing his pathetic form held together by fine threads of blue light. Slight involuntary twitches to his fingers, cheeks, mouth made me realize the nightmare he was possibly facing. I calmed my anger.

I stepped into the trunk of light to be next to Death.

"How we do this?" I was unsure where to start.

"Place your hand on his heart, but don't touch the blue links." Death answered for me.

I pressed my hand over the free space of Leinard's heart.

"Famine." I gasped when I felt Leinard's voice strike my brain like a bolt of lightning. I recoiled my hand.

"Don't let go! You'll lose the connection and any hopes of saving him." Death huffed, looking pasty.

I returned my hand to Leinard's heart and screamed.

Fire and the pain of knives slashing my skin assaulted my senses. Insufferable agony made my vision spin out of control until all I saw was black.

"Famine. You're here?" Leinard's voice broke through the thick black. "Hold to me. Please don't let go!"

I suffered the pain without resistance. It eventually gave way to soothing relief. Leinard's true image became clear.

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Leinard stood before me as a solid human being. The space behind him was an unpainted canvas of white.

"F-Famine, what are you doing here?" His voice quivered.

Something felt off about his presence. He was small, not in the sense of size; I felt that the white around him was devouring him.

"Colonel, I'm here to save you." I held back my cringe at saying a

cheesy line.

"No, no, you can't be here!" He insisted, his eyes darting about the space like he was seeing something that I couldn't.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me along at a dead run.

When we stopped for breath. I gasped at his image. The Leinard panting for breath next to me was a younger version about my age.

"The attendants won't find us here, we can be alone for the moment." He assumed his usual stoic expression, but his arms wrapped my waist with too much caress.

"I missed you, Charlese-sama." He kissed my forehead, cheeks and lips.

Charlese-sama?! Who the hell was that?! Didn't he call me Famine moments ago?

I struggled out of his hold and almost screamed when I saw my reflection in a cracked mirror, dangling from the edge of a black pot suspended in air from a hook nailed to the ceiling trim.

I was a girl! A gorgeous one with dainty blonde curls bundled up in a neat bun held in place by delicate silver pins. Rouge highlighted soft pale cheeks, a wine-red color covered my full lips. The selling point of my angelic face was my glistening green eyes, drawn out with black eyeliner. I was caked in a bottle-green satin dress that belled out from the waist by under-layers of wired petticoats that rubbed the cloth of the pantyhose sheathing my slim legs.

"I'm a Velvet Rose Model," I mumbled with awe as I remembered those watercolor drawings of pretty women in Bulldog's secret fashion and gravure books.

No, hell no! No freaking way, I was a girl!

Both my hands cradled and felt up my bouncy bosoms to be sure. I groaned at the killer tightness around my waist, making it hard to breathe. I was wearing a corset a size too small for my voluptuous curves.

My admiration for women who went to the effort to showcase their beauty had increased tenfold.

"Charlese-sama. You must be careful not to come here again. These halls are too dangerous for you," Leinard scolded me with a low whisper, oblivious to my gender dilemma.

I glanced in my surroundings and saw us taking shelter in a shallow alcove entrance of a white wall corridor.

Morning light from the large window panes (dotted along one wall) warmed our faces. Light threw gentle, yellow hues over the hanging cast-iron pots lining the windowless and bland stone walls, shallow ceiling lanterns and faded gray painted window shutters.

The place reminded me of the Kuri basement hallways. So, I was in a servant's corridor?

The feeling of hands on my waist pulled my attention back to Leinard.

"Look, Colonel, um, Lei... yeah. I'm not who you think I am."

I felt flustered by Leinard's persistent touches. He reeled me closer and pressed his lips to mine. I reacted with a curt slap to his face.

"Now, here, young'un! You do not put your lips on a lady!" I stood back, wagging my finger austerely before his surprised face.

"Charlese-sama? What's the matter? Did I offend you?" He startled me when he dropped to the floor with a bowed apology.

"Oh, no, Colonel, get up!" My flustered hands gestured for him to rise.

"Leinard! What are you doing?!" A stranger interrupted our conversation.

My eyes went wide when I saw that the stranger was a younger version of Commander Miles Appleton. He was dressed in a black and white penguin suit with a black bow tie, large polished shoes and pristine white-gloved hands. His blond hair was slicked back off his baby-face. Did he just come from a glitzy party?

His narrowed blue eyes widened with a pleasant surprise when he saw my face. They narrowed again with vehemence towards Leinard standing before him.

"You're accosting Our Fair Lady! I'll report you to the attendants." Miles accused Leinard.

"I wasn't." Leinard shyly defended himself with his head bowed toward his feet.

It was the first time I noticed his modest workman's jeans, white cotton shirt, practical suspenders, scuffed tan boots and a tweed flat cap covering his brown hair.

This wasn't making sense. Leinard was a son of a high prince. Why was he dressed as a lowly servant? I frowned at his pitiful sight.

"He was helping me with my, um," I looked down and saw my

perfectly shaped ankles and bottle-green slipper heels. "He was helping me refit my shoe, which had slipped off when I tripped on the carpet."

Both boys looked at me with raised brows; their stare lingered on the scrubbed stone floor that was absent of carpet.

"I mean, crack in the floor, whatever the term for these things are," I awkwardly laughed off, mentally praying to Buddha for a change of scenery.

"To have you in these halls is not fitting for your status, Lady Charlese. These lowly servant mongrels will not hesitate to violate you." Miles's condescending voice was grating on my nerves.

"I will escort you back to where our kind are." His voice almost spat out the differences of their status at Leinard. "You will do well not to mingle with these fleabags again."

I gulped when Miles held out his gloved hand toward me.

"Please, Charlese-sama, allow Monsieur Appleton to escort you back to your kind," Leinard said with an expressionless tone to his voice.

He was a far contrast from the earlier boy with the passionate touches.

"My Lady," Miles prompted, betraying a slight tone of impatience.

I looked at Leinard and sighed. I knew him well enough to know his "do as you're told" expression.

I grabbed Miles' hand with a manly grip from my own white-gloved hand (trimmed with elegant lace around my thin wrist). I swallowed a chuckle at his surprise.

"Charlese-sama, please advise Your Highness that all is well." Leinard formally bowed, turned and walked away from me.

"Leinard," his name escaped my mouth.

I gulped at Miles's glare.

His expression resumed his polite formality.

There was no other option but to follow his lead out of the corridor.

He led me down a hallway adorned with lavish red carpet, gleaming gold and silver vein marble walls with bronze candle sconces lining our path with subdued light. Soft light beamed over our heads from rose-gold chandelier trees with three tiers holding pillar candles.

Positioned evenly between the sconces were gold figurine frames of family portraits glorifying a stout and balding military man adorned with his wartime merits across the right side of his stiff navy jacket. I

held back my laughter at the portrait's obvious attempts to make the man taller by stretching out his legs near the bottom of the frame. The artists should've spent more of the time making his face handsome by doing away with his pug nose, beady eyes and tight lips.

"Lady Charlese, you must not associate with that Leinard boy anymore." Mile's spoke without taking his eyes away from the way ahead of him.

"Why?" I frowned, my mind back to my present situation.

"Why?" He stopped and faced me with clear exasperation. "Your Highness disgraced him. He is a pariah to this kingdom. I understand you had past relations, being siblings by marriage. That relationship is now null and void by His Majesty's law."

He sighed and turned to one of the portraits, taking in deep breaths like the image was offering him affirmations. "If not for the good graces of our patron Marlo, he would be within a prison system."

He faced me again, his blue eyes aglow with a set expression. "Shall we move on?"

I gulped and nodded. He opened the elaborately decorated floral doors at the end. We stepped into an atmosphere of high society and exaggerated wealth. It was almost blinding.

Rows of shining white diamond and silver five-tier candle chandeliers hung over our heads. Their party light was reflected across a vast area of polished floor boards and plaster white walls bearing twelve animal crest flags. At the head of the flags was a mighty black and white eagle that represented Sol's main deity - Exacles. This was the High King's crest. It seemed it also represented Charlese's family from eavesdropped conversations between dance partners.

Tapping heels and shuffling shoes squeaked across the floor. Dancing bodies moved graciously around the multicolored fairy balls, which whizzed about in time with the merry music being played by an orchestra on the stage.

Bright lights were making the ballroom glamour go to my head with an ache.

Miles was quick to ditch me for his familiar boys' club toward a seedy spot near the back of the ballroom where we had entered.

I had been dancing in a killer corset and numbing heels for ages. Every time I had tried to call it quits, some pompous pretty-boy would

take my hand and lead me into another dancing merry-go-round. I hated this twosome activity. However, the body I had unwittingly invaded loved it. Especially the Five-Step Waltz.

I was amazed at how many boys in black and white penguin suits were keen to dance this routine with me. It was to the point that all their faces became one big blur.

The dancing experience was not all fruitless. Further, eavesdropping had me learning more about myself. I was a scion from a wealthy and politically influential unit family to the king. It explained the reason for the potential suitors wanting to claim my hand with a dance.

So, Leinard getting friendly with me was something that I, meaning Charlese, had wanted, right? Why run off into the servant's quarters if not to have forbidden nookie? My face blushed a deep red at the thought of Leinard and me making out beyond a kiss.

"Gaah! What am I thinking?" I thought aloud and tensed when I remembered where I was.

"Charlese-sama? Is everything okay?" Asked a sweet-face boy.

"Oh, well, I've been dancing non-stop. My heels are a tad painful." I flippantly answered.

I grabbed a finely dressed girl who was leaving the floor and crudely paired her up with my dance partner; leaving the scene before either of them had time to protest.

I pushed and weaved my way through other strapping young men in black-white penguin suits and women in sequence ball gowns of green, blue and gold-white; their hands, necks, ears and other body parts on display glimmering with strings of diamonds or other precious stone. Sparkling headdresses stylishly held together well-manicured hair. The aroma of rose water, fragrant powder and musk overpowered my senses.

The glitz and glamour felt like I was in a circus. My head needed fresh air.

I stepped out onto a wide terrace and gaped at the sparkling wonder before my eyes.

Moonlight bathed the terrace's moonstone, making it twinkle like stars on a night sky. A refreshing scent of lavender and pine uplifted my senses and cleared my head. A gentle breeze cooled my flushed skin as I leaned against the stone railing. The way beyond the balcony was covered with night, turning the landscape into an amorphous mystery.

"Beautiful night."

I turned to the sound of Leinard's voice. Thoughts of being held by him rushed to my mind. Charlese was in love with him. My heart pounded with confirmation of the fact. Beneath these emotions, I was feeling peeved.

"Colonel."

He's face was almost in the shadows as he loitered near the balcony's steps. I spied the vague outline of hedge gardens to his back.

I glanced about to see if anyone had noticed him, when I felt certain no one was paying us attention, I grabbed his hand and dragged him into a sprint down the steps.

We entered the amorphous darkness, fumbling our way down gravel paths toward more outlines of hedges and bushes. I guessed we were headed for the entrance of a garden maze.

Leinard took control or our direction with confidence. He led me through a corridor of dense hedge walls, smelling of gardenia and rose.

Our run led into a private sitting area, which was out of view of the party. The music and merriment were vague noises in the distance.

My heart beat with a burning ache. I admit, most of the pain was from running in heels.

Leinard called upon a small ball of light no bigger than a marble. It floated in the air before our faces, so we could see each other's eyes.

His gray eyes showed a tenderness and earnest, his staring was making my heart beat faster.

Those earlier thoughts of wanting to be wrapped in his arms pestered my brain. Damn it. I couldn't fight the feeling, nor did I have the feeling of wanting to.

I tenderly stroked his cheek.

"I'm sorry about before. I'm not myself," I whispered.

"I know. This is not right, yet..." He continued his conversation with a kiss, which turned into passionate sucking, stroking and skillful undressing.

My body tingled from where he necked. He was making me swoon from his teasing pinches and tender touches to my naked skin. I wanted more of him; I needed more.

He carried me to a stone bench and had me straddle his lap, kissing my breasts as he exposed them to the cool, night air.

We removed the clothes that stopped us from becoming one. I moaned his name when he lowered my hips, so his long member could enter me. We moved, synchronizing with each other's pace; kissing passionately, so we were breathing each other's air. His mouth tenderly marked me in many places to stake his claim. I was his and he was mine.

Our love making eventually reached a climax and sweet comedown. I relished the moment of being held in his arms.

"I think we better return." Leinard suggested.

I could tell from his eyes that he wanted more time, but we both realized that would be troublesome. He helped me redress and fix up my makeup.

It was at this moment I realized that my brothers and Brystagg had seen something of me that I had refused to see for myself. Seething with annoyance was an understatement.

"Hey, Colonel. You know, one day you'll meet this genius boy with black eyes. This boy will have the satisfaction of knocking your ass to the ground because of this moment," I declared with a cocky grin and pressed a kiss to his forehead to seal the promise.

My forehead scrunched with a frown, noticing his coolness to the fact. He wasn't surprised?

"Looking forward to it," Leinard said, going along with my comment.

He finger-flicked my forehead with a self-satisfied attitude.

These Aueralius Brothers were really something.

We made it out of the garden maze, where we were greeted with an unfriendly reception.

A group of hard-hitting goons in bowler hats had us surrounded. They looked weird dressed in black frock coats rimmed with brass buttons, black double-breasted vest and pin-striped pants where the hems touched the cuffs of lace up boots. The gentleman thug look wasn't a fair choice for their bulky bodies.

Their black-gloved hands leaning on silver canes unnerved me the most. Those walking sticks glinted too unnaturally in the semi-darkness for my liking.

At their head was Miles.

"Appalling, absolutely appalling. Your taste in men needs major revision, Lady Charlese. Especially after I had coached you on sticking to our kind. Shameless girl." Miles expressed his disgust with his words.

"Bring them to the Training Chamber of the Urisen Floor," he ordered the goons with a wave of his hand. "Our Masters wants them to bear witness."

"Get off me!" I cursed as my arms were painfully held back by a couple of bowler-hat goons.

They threw a sack over my head. I muffled my protests with a fierce struggle, but the scent of cinnamon and aniseed overpowered my senses to knock me out.

I came around to an empty room, facing a mirrored wall that was reflecting pitch black.

I sat on my knees with heavy clamps weighing my arms down behind my back, towards the floor, so my joints felt like they were going to pop out from their sockets at any given movement.

Some of my green satin dress had been torn near my waist and my wired corset had been removed, so the skirt flowed around my lower body. Some of the material close to my deep cleavage was also torn. An image of Leinard's face surfaced to mind.

I glanced around for him and saw he was sitting on his knees next to me; iron clamps keeping his arms behind his back, like mine. His head was bowed low, so I was only able to make out the top of his head; fine brown fringed hung over his downcast eyes.

"My father is adamant, scions of the kingdom need an example to appreciate their status." Miles's uncaring voice broke the silence.

"A man of wisdom. We've seen this kingdom almost to ruins and rise again. It was because our High King appreciated his status."

He stood before us with a stance meaning business, sporting the stiff peak cap and official tanned uniform of a low-ranking Illuminate Officer. His white-gloved hand unsheathed the longsword from his hip and thrust it at Leinard's neck, leaving an inch of space away from going through with the cut.

"You were in line to being Sire's apparent heir, but you defied your status." The blade's tip made contact with Leinard's skin.

Leinard kept his head bowed low.

"Pathetic. I suppose it's due to your blood from your mother's side."

He pulled his sword away and sheathed it with a flourish of disgust.

I glanced at Leinard, noting a quiet calmness like a snake ready to strike.

"The one who disgusts me the most is you, Lady Charlese. To make love with your younger step-brother." Miles scrunched up his face and spat a gob of spit to my forehead.

"Don't." I whispered an order to Leinard when I saw his shoulders lowered for an attack. I shook off as much of the spittle.

"Get your rocks off, spitting on a woman?" I coolly responded.

Miles's expression gave away his true attitude of a smug prick. "I see a filthy whore. I'll spit on you as many times as I want."

"Enough, Corporal," said a voice I didn't recognize.

It belonged to a slender woman, donning the tanned uniform and black lace-up boots. Her auburn hair was bundled in a stiff peak cap sporting the ensigns of a colonel. Her image was flawless olive skin, perfectly applied red lipstick on thin lips and precise brown eyeliner and shadow to lend intimation to her stern green eyes. She fitted the profile image of a high ranking officer.

Her white gloved hands loitered around the gun holsters hanging off her double belt. I recognized the slight elongation of an experienced trigger finger.

"Charlese De Borno Arlingdon. You trouble our High King by associating with these Aueralius boys."

She stood before me with a strange expression in her eyes. It wasn't one of contempt, as Miles, yet it wasn't welcoming either. Her next comments were for Leinard, who had been quietly observing the situation.

"Leinard Aueralius. If you had taken an oath to support your father..."

"He's not my father." Leinard interrupted her spiel.

He yelped at the brutal punch Miles gave his cheek. The woman acknowledged the abuse with a sigh.

"Don't you dare spit blood to this floor, boy," she warned Leinard. "As I was saying. Since you declined his rule, corrupted his only other true scion, you must pay the price."

She faced us with a sober expression on her pretty face. I realized the colonel woman could probably switch on the glamorous charm well and successfully beguile a string of men.

Well, she switched on something different instead.

Lights turned on to reveal a room behind the mirror wall. It revealed a granite stone slab at the center. The slab had leather belts dangling

down each end. Behind the slab was a wall of iron clamps, spiked chains, crude pokes and sticks that were caked with dark red and brown stains. Pots of pokes and leather batons protruded from a freestanding cauldron at the foot of the stone slab.

My heart skipped a beat. I almost stopped breathing when I saw a younger Trix dragged into the room by a pair of bowler-hat goons.

"What have you done with him?" I gasped, receiving no answer.

I tried to look away, but Miles came up behind me and pulled my head back around. I was forced to watch the horrific scene unfolding.

The goons dumped Trix onto the stone slap like he was a sack of potatoes.

I felt my anger boiling, watching them strip him naked. He was as responsive as a rag doll, too weak to move from all the blood running down his legs, arms and torso from where he had been cut, punched and lashed at his back countless times. The goons placed a wedge under his legs, so his backside was in plain sight.

"Why?" I swallowed down a bitter breath.

"Please, don't do this. Why?" Leinard whimpered. "I've done what that man had asked of me."

The Colonel woman smirked. "You slept with this woman. Therefore, you violated the rules. Anyway, no one really gives a shit about what you boys do. Sire has already forfeited your rights as his heir. You have no more status than a lowly slave."

I wanted to shout, scream and rip my hands out of the iron clamps that kept me down. I couldn't move. Miles kept my head pointed at the scene. The colonel woman slapped my eyes to keep them open. I dared a sideways glance to Leinard and saw him with his head raised; watching and taking note. No doubt to be able to avenge.

The goons left the room. A group of unclad, ugly, fat-arsed men entered; most resembling ogres. They raped an already battered Trix; forcing him to take their seed into every orifice. Using the torture tools to mark his skin. They rammed them into his mouth and anus without mercy. It was brutal, horrific and made me seething for vengeance.

"You'll pay for this! I don't know when." I poured my burning hatred into the colonel woman's eyes. "I see you now. I will not forget. Woman, one day you'll beg me to revert you to null!"

"Charlese." Leinard whispered. I recognized his tone to stop talking.

They made us watch Trix's disgusting violation to the end, and afterward as he bled out on the stone slab unconscious. The lights went out. The wall was a black mirror again.

A sick breath escaped my mouth when I felt a hard mound to my lower back.

"Got your kicks watching the boy being sex fodder for those ugly beasts?" I randomly threw out at the baby-face prick.

"What?!" Miles roared into my ears.

Bang on target. He pulled me around to face him. I chortled at his flushed cheeks showing signs of arousal.

"Say one more word, Charlese, I'll make sure you get the same treatment."

"So, it comes down to animal instinct." I calmed my emotions. "Miles, one day you'll find your precious status meaningless. What are you going to do then?"

Bowler-hat goons hauled us to our feet to drag us out. No doubt they had some more fun installed for us.

"Silence the bitch!" He shouted to the goons.

Neither did at the orders of the colonel woman. She was calm, but I noticed the slight twitch to her trigger finger.

"Place them in the tanks of Triuta. Now that they have seen how it's done, they're ready for their own initiations."

"I'll be seeing you again," I mouthed to the woman as the goons pushed us out of the room.

We were led down a dark corridor that ended at a set of fortified iron double doors.

The door's faces had an image etched into it. It was an image of a full moon casting rays over two howling wolves sitting between two pillars. I had seen this image before in one of Bulldog's newspaper journals. It was the channeling image for the moon goddess Numoir. Also, the emblem for magis of dark magic.

"Colonel. This is bad," I whispered my concern.

"I'm sorry," he said with a lowered head.

The goons said a spell to open the doors. It slowly opened with a splintering grind.

I blew out a sigh of relief when the doors stopped against a wall with a heavy clang.

Our walk continued across a circular chamber and down stone steps, which spiraled toward a central area with a lion head symbol painted on the floor.

The stench of fudge and musk overpowered the air. Distant cries for mercy and curt screams reverberated off the stone wall corridors.

They pushed us into a stone cell and locked us in darkness.

"Argia," Leinard whispered.

A small ball of light formed from the palm of his hand. It floated between us, so we could see our faces.

"I'm sorry about Trix, back there." I consoled him. "I'll do my best to save him."

Leinard gave a halfhearted chuckle. "You're not Charlese."

I frowned.

"Why, um, you say that?" I asked, feeling twitchy.

"We've been intimate a lot of times. Our sex back at the gardens was the first time I felt passion between us." Leinard answered through a weak smile. "You also call me Colonel and my brother Trix. Only close friends call him that. She never would."

"Right." I blushed. "Um, so, those disgusting pigs and Trix?"

Leinard's expression darkened. "It should've been me. When our mother died, I abdicated, our paternal father sent Illuminate men to escort us to Youmen Prison."

He further explained on how Sirius's right-hand man (Marlo Delconis) had redirected the order to have them taken to his slave mansion called Triuta. He offered the boys a choice; one would work as a servant, the other as an urisen for the kingdom's elite. Leinard and Trix had to choose who would be what. Marlo decided that Leinard would be the urisen if the boys didn't decide for themselves. It was a nasty form of intimidation. As expected, Trix had taken the tougher option to give his baby brother a better chance. Leinard had struck a deal with Marlo. He'd do the man's bidding in order to spare Trix from the worst forms of torture. As such, no one was allowed to touch Leinard except Marlo.

"Then I slept with you." I expelled a troubled sigh when I realized what I had caused.

"It didn't matter who I slept with. They were going to torture Trix anyway. Now they'll do the same for me." Leinard tenderly whispered. "I didn't want this for you."

I felt my anger at boiling point. "Bastards! I'll revert them all to null!"

My anger subsided at the sight of Leinard's head bowed with defeat.

"How old are you?"

"Of age for a couple of years now." Leinard automatically answered, still weak.

Eighteen. He was still a boy, for crying out loud!

"Listen, Trix tried to spare you, right?"

Leinard nodded, his head still bowed.

"The strong bonds that some brothers have will keep everyone fighting for each other. Nothing can break a solid brotherhood." I spoke clearly and concisely. "Right now, you and Trix have a stronger bond, no person or thing can interfere with. It's too pure."

I titled my head low, so I was able to see his downcast eyes. "You saw what pigs did to Trix, but you may not have seen what Trix did for you, for himself. I did."

I straightened up when Leinard raised his head to face me, square on.

"What did you see?" Leinard asked with a stronger voice.

"Calm blue eyes. They looked weak on the surface, but they were calm as still water when he copped their abuse." I recounted my observation I had glimpsed when I was forced to watch the abuse.

"Calm." Leinard repeated with a steady voice. "Say, if it was you to decide who was taken hostage by kidnappers..."

"I wouldn't let them take anyone." I raised a hand to stop him from interrupting on the rest of my explanation.

"Or we'd all be taken. If they took me, I would find a way to escape and save my brothers. You'd do the same, right?"

"You really love your brothers." Leinard swallowed a breath.

"I'd stake my chi on it. Right now, my brothers and I are separated. I'm doing everything I can to reunite us."

We stared into each other's eyes before Leinard asked me a serious question.

"What's your name?"

"Ganmo," I blurted.

My mouth had been fixated on a vision of tasty ganmodoki. I was starving.

"Okay, Ganmo," Leinard chuckled. "So, what's the plan from here?"

I glanced around the cell and saw black space. Not even Leinard's

piddly light was able to draw out the room's outline. I suspected the walls were of the same stone that Hell's Labyrinth was made from. Our first task was finding the door.

"Let's go with a classic, shall we?" I answered with high spirits.

"And that is?"

"According to my brother War...ren, it means, 'draw attention from the guards' then pounce.' He read it in one of Bull...er fiction magazines." I awkwardly explained.

"I see, ladies first then." Leinard smugly gestured for me to cause the scene.

"Men." I grimaced.

I commenced with some of my cheesiest acting that I had never done before. Almost wanted to laugh when the sounds of a lock being fiddled with greeted our ears and light near-blinded our eyes as it poured in from the opening door.

"Sir, Lady Charlese is going into a fit." Leinard made up on the spot.

I yelped and started shaking myself violently on the ground.

Bowler-hat goons stepped into the room.

Suckers.

Leinard called upon a wind spell to knock them out cold.

"These guys are golems fashioned from mud, so they don't do well with wind attacks." He stoically informed. "As you can see, they're not that bright. Lucky for us."

We crawled around the bodies and found what we needed inside their pant pockets. Leinard used the keys to unlock our iron binds around our wrists. He then grabbed the two key crystals lying in their hands.

"Let's find Trix." I said.

Leinard nodded.

We left the unconscious golems and cell behind.

We carefully sprinted through black stone corridors, doing our best not to make a noise and draw attention from golems.

I cursed when I realized that the place was similar to Hell's Labyrinth. The walls constantly changed formation. The paths we ran moved on us, consistently pushing us toward the center with the lion floor. Going back was never the same way. A few times we had narrowly avoided contact with the golems, which was bad for my already overworked heart.

"Damn it! Without a mapglass, how's anyone expect to know where they're going around here?!" I huffed as we took a time out to catch a breath. "My lady heels are annoying my arches."

"Did you just say mapglass? Where're you from?" Leinard was giving me one of his classic one-raised-brow looks.

"Dunno know if I should tell you." I replied, copying his expression.

"Ok, well confirm something for me Ganmo. You're a hiruda right? Where's the real Charlese?"

"I'm not a hiruda." I screwed up my face with outrage. "That orange cloud thing can be shrill glitter!"

My expression softened with thoughts of where the real lady could be. "I don't know. If we don't reach Trix, bust out of this place, we might not be able to find her."

"First, we need to know where we're going." Leinard glanced around the area.

The path had taken us to an entrance of a squarish utility room, which had hundreds of brass tulip bells running even rows around the walls.

"A call room! I'm a believer now. You are a lucky charm." Leinard said excitedly as he crept toward the entrance.

We peeked our heads around the opening and saw two golems standing before a woman who was sitting at a rectangular table in the room's center. She was taking note of the numbers for bells that jangled, on a long piece of parchment covering the table's entire surface.

So far, we were undetected.

"The bell for Cell 4-A is at warning. Two prisoners have escaped." The woman noted with an expressionless voice. "See to reclaim."

We crept away from the opening and hid behind some weapons crates stacked up against the wall.

The golems stomped past us and up a flight of grilled metal stairs that we had alighted from.

"Okay, so this is the plan." Leinard briefed me on his thoughts.

I bravely entered the room and stood before the woman who was wearing the tanned uniform of an Illuminate Officer. By her skinny frame, soft skin and aged glasses still in good condition, she wasn't a soldier.

She was absorbed with the large diagram that covered across the

paper. A quick glance confirmed that this paper was the level's map. Leinard was right. I was one lucky bastard.

A second passed. Two seconds ticked by, judging by the round clock on the wall above the entrance archway. She was still focused on the map.

"Ahem," I impatiently cleared my throat.

Her eyes went wide with shock and disbelief.

"Now you see me." I smiled at her. "I'll be taking this."

I grabbed the map in my arms, fighting off her protest.

"Apologizes, but we cannot let you leave." Leinard said to the woman. "Really sorry."

He knocked her out cold.

We carefully dragged her to an obscure corner of the room, closed the door upon our exit.

Leinard led me towards a set of iron stairs at the far right, across the lion floor symbol.

"Crappolla a million!" I groaned at the sound of whooping sirens.

Red and white flashing overpowered all other lights.

"Needless to say, we don't have much time," Leinard said as he laid out the map on the floor before us.

"Ikasi nazazu," he whispered and closed his eyes. Blue light covered his face.

I gasped with awe when the markings and drawings of the map lifted off the page. The ink had transformed into a ball of black cloud in the air.

Leinard opened his mouth and swallowed the ball. The blue light disappeared, restoring his features to normal.

"It's how I passed on most of my school tests." He cheekily declared.

His face contorted with a wince. "It gives you a terrible pinch to your temples. At least I know the way of this place now. The walls follow a predicative pattern. More luck for us."

I looked at the paper and saw it was blank. He patted my shoulder with the sign to move on. We left the paper and crept up the iron stairs.

The landing opened to a narrow black and red corridor.

"Stop." Leinard whispered.

He took a few steps toward one wall and pulled me in front of him. The other wall disappeared like it was never there. A new wall appeared, creating a new path.

We followed the newly created path and continued this routine until we finally reached the top of another level of rich-red corridors with gold doors and gold-red floral carpeted floors. Light came from white fairy balls dancing within glass jar sconces.

The sounds of screaming, moaning and crying grew louder as we crept past the doors.

I groaned when our way ahead was blocked by bowler hat golems.

"Can you use your magic?" I whispered.

"Not here, too narrow. It'll likely alert the entire floor." Leinard answered.

I screwed up my face with the realization that I was going to have to resort to brute force. It made me wonder how much muscle Charlese had on her.

"Work the charm it is." I sighed and drew the golems' attentions with a wolf whistle.

The mindless fools rushed for an attack and straight into Leinard's ambush.

He moved out of the corner he had been hugging, crept up behind them and stealthy stole one of their metal canes, unsheathing a long thin blade resembling an epee. It shimmered with a silver brilliance as he thrust the blade into their chests, eliminating both of them with skillful slashes.

We dragged them to one side and salvaged important items they carried.

More luck for me when one of them carried a key crystal.

Leinard showed me his findings of a bag of shrills and a normal gold key.

"That's it?" I complained at the tight-arse goons. "No daro?"

"You want a ticket to the ball?" Leinard joked.

"Been there, done that, never again." I sighed.

We continued down the corridor with Leinard at the lead.

"I hope you can use that." My eyes pointed at the sword he carried.

His eyes narrowed with offense. "Didn't you see me back there? Have no fear, I've been using this since birth."

"To change your own diapers?" I blurted

He replied with a sarcastic smile.

We kept our conversations to a minimum as we ran through corridors,

eliminating goon threats as we passed. Me with my heels and Leinard with his sword.

We carried on up the stairs and stepped out into an over-glamorous corridor of white and gold carpet, more glass jar scones and silver-white walls.

Contorted voices, emitting distress and negative energies, were heavy on this floor.

"Triuta Indulgence Level. Trix will be in one of these rooms."

My heart skipped beats and abrupt pauses every time we crept past a gold gilded door.

The dark and negative energies from the doors gave me the chills. The stench of sick fudge wafted about the air.

"I don't see any guards." I was hoping I didn't put my foot in my mouth. "How we find him?"

Leinard gestured for me to be quiet. He closed his eyes and stood still like he was honing in Trix's whereabouts.

"That room." He pointed his finger to the door on the far right.

We hurried to the door and found the knob locked. I peered closely at the hand and saw a set of tiny number running in a row. I drew Leinard's attention to the numbers.

"Bothersome. It's a Mercy Lock." Leinard groaned. "Damnit!"

"We have a key, right?" I held up the key crystal.

"That won't work. The key is blood. Only the blood that set this combination can open the door." Leinard explained that the numbers were just a label, but the actual lock was the imprint behind the numbers. A blood imprint.

"So, can we take the door off the hinges?" I hoped I asked another obvious question.

I felt self-satisfied smugness when Leinard gave me one of his one-brow expressions.

His eyes darted from each hinge of the door. He then studied the next room's door and stood back with raised brows. His mouth stretched wide.

"Have to do it this way. Prepare for an attack." He ordered as he rolled his shoulders and leaned in towards the door's hinges.

"Ezkutatu hinge." He breathed over the hinges, making them turn to frost and shatter into cold air.

We both caught the door as it fell forward, carefully placed it to one side against the wall.

"What the hell you kids doing here?!" Growled a naked ogre of a man with his ding-dong shamelessly hanging low.

"Joining the party." I battered my eyelids as I gingerly approached the creep.

I suggestively removed my slipper, raised it before him and stabbed his lower area with the spiky end; grabbed a lamp from the nearby night table and smashed it over the ogre-man's head, knocking him out cold.

"Oi, hey, please let me out of these!" said a mild-mannered boy whose face was beautiful to be an angel.

I gasped when I recognized the voice. "Hang on."

I fiddled with the gold clamps and realized it needed a key. "Colonel, throw me that key."

Leinard frowned at having being interrupted with his break-wall plan. He fished through his pocket and threw me the gold key we had taken from the golems.

I released the kid from the bed.

"Thank you!" He hugged me.

"Stick with us, okay?" I said as I helped him dress into some clothes.

"Stay back a bit." Leinard said and used a spell to create a hole in the wall.

"What the hell?!" shouted a half-naked man.

Leinard drove his sword through the man's chest with an expression that unnerved me a bit.

I threw him the key to unlock Trix from his gold binds. He freed Trix and helped him stand up.

"What's this vile woman doing here?!" Trix spat at me.

"Gaah, would you men please stop throwing spit on my face! If you wanna leave your mark - pay me daro!" I pouted, wiping Trix's spray off my cheek.

"Hah! Who the hell are you? Leinard, who's this chick? She ain't Charlese!" Trix attempted to approach me and stumbled to the floor. "A Night Vamprous? You're a hiruda aren't you?"

"A hiruda?! I'm insulted." I yelled with my hands on my hips.

"Ha, I'm feeling better already." Trix perked up, his sarcasm giving him a boast of energy.

I noticed that a lot of Trix's earlier wounds were healed. Some with a slight discoloration as a reminder. The weird kiss we had shared back in the lantern room sort of made sense now.

Leinard rolled his eyes and let out a groan as he helped Trix up. He slung an overcoat, from the chair, over his naked body.

Trix was doing his best not to stand like a newborn fawn.

"Oh, hey Cass, they got you out too." Trix noticed the mild-mannered boy next to me. "Excellent."

"We better ditch this joint. Bring the baby deer," I said to Leinard.

Trix continuously muttered about me having some cheek.

I made sure that Cass was able to make a longer journey out of the room.

We managed to assist Trix and Cass to the end of the floor. It was as I had suspected. A trap was waiting for us before the exit. I realized our smooth run was a game of mouse, maze and cheese to these people. Well, they had better not complain about losing to their own rules.

A cloud of icy air descended on us, weighing us down to our knees. Icy ghost hands wrapped our throats. I recognized the hollow eyes of ghosts. Damn, if only we had salt.

The colonel woman approached us with an unimpressed snarl on her red painted lips.

"Tsk, bothersome. I was dragged out here from my sleep just to outwit you. Hurry up and revert to null, so I can go back to sleep," she complained.

I was annoyed and surprised by her self-centered callousness. How the heck did she end up a colonel?

"Suffer...prin...cess. St...ill b-be... ugly." My voice fell short; too cold to speak further.

"What?!" She kicked me.

"Mai... t-tasu..." Damn. Why did the spell have to be a long tongue twister?

"Maitasunean eta grazian itzuli zure tokira," Leinard managed to say with one big breath. How did he know?

Our throats were released with thankful sighs. The air resumed a room temperature.

"You wanna sleep so badly, I'll cater." I said to the flabbergasted woman. "I'll make sure you get your precious sleep."

I stood before her with a steady stance and placed my hands, defiantly, on my hips.

"Let me say this, woman-to-woman, we're gonna bust this joint. You're gonna punch the ground with frustration at being helpless to stop our escape."

"Ganmo, tell me you have a plan!" Leinard whispered near my ear.

"Nada. I'm a bringer of luck, right? Have some faith." I reassured him with a cheesy wink copied from Trix's signature style.

He didn't look convinced.

"Ha! I'm liking this Charlese. I'm in." Trix was energized. Seems his hira powers had restored his health for a fight.

He beamed at the colonel woman with one of his signature grins, baring his perfectly white teeth.

"Hey Bryan, why don't we get a friendly with each other." He suggestively taunted the woman. "You know you wanna."

She responded with a snarl.

I hung back to be with Cass who was in no position to fight his way through anyone.

"Don't worry, Cass, I'll be your shield." I reassured him.

"You're definitely not Charlese. She's like this woman, only thinking of herself. I don't think she'd resort to necromantic spells, either. They're not glamorous," Cass commented.

"Sorry?" I looked at him, perplexed.

"No, I mean, thank you! Whoever you are, please stay in this woman's body!" Cass flashed me a friendly smile.

"It wouldn't be right for a lady to do all the work. I may look weak, but my magic is strong." Cass's smile became a wicked grin as he raised his glowing hands.

His eyes gleamed with an iridescent green. "Thanks for unlocking the binds, I can use magic again."

The fighting commenced.

"Hey, Bryan," Trix called out to the woman to keep her attention fixed on him. His expression sobered into a mannerism of business.

"Eguzkiaren argia, sua deitzen dut." He coolly released his spell with a cocky smirk.

Fireballs formed in the air and were hurled toward the bowler hat golems. The golems countered with thick dust particle attacks to put the

fires out.

Trix changed tactics and rushed toward Bryan with fists raised. "Ura erregai nire eskuak!"

My eyes widened when I saw a blaze of icy-blue light wrap Trix's fists and feet like socks and gloves. He kicked at Bryan with roundhouse, low and high range attacks; coordinating his arm and leg attacks in an enchanting Wu King martial arts ballet. His movements made blue light trails in the air.

"Ganmo!" I heard Leinard shout at me.

I narrowly missed a golem's lethal punch to my head.

"Stop spacing out!" Leinard scolded me whilst driving his sword crudely into two golems.

He fished through is pocket, pulled out and threw me a bag of shrills.

"Nice." I grabbed a fistful and commenced with my own attack.

"SU!" I yelled as I pelleted three at the golems that reached for me.

High-pitched sounds and hefty glitter filled the air.

"You're looking hideous right now." I heard Trix tease Bryan.

She wasn't faring well under his martial arts attack. Her colonel hat had been knocked off, so her wavy auburn locks tumbled about her shoulders and messily down her back. Lipstick was smeared across her mouth and sides of her cheeks. Black eyeshadow and liner were smudged around her eyes, making them appear bruised. I yelped when my mind compared her current look with the image of a juxtapositioner demon.

She screamed with outrage as she fired rounds of bullets that Trix was able to dodge.

I screamed when one of the strays had clipped my arm.

"Goddamn it. Su!" I threw my last shrill at the lone golem protecting Bryan's back, turning it into glitter.

Bryan stood alone.

She stopped her fighting and retreated a few steps back. A smile stretched wide on her face, making her look very much like that court jester demon. She pulled out a tiny silver-glass bell and rang it.

An ear-splintering explosion threw all of us backwards and further in the indulgence corridor.

I groaned when I saw that we were surrounded by half-naked creepy men who had been alerted by the bell.

"Well, isn't this just dandy," I grumbled.

"Do what you like with them. I want to know what they're up to." Bryan ordered the perverts.

She fixed up her face with a spell.

Magic intervened with her orders. A strong vibration and painful ringing entered our ears.

My vision blurred into obscure black and white outlines.

"Hormak apurtu, kateak askatu." A deep, soothing voice permeated my mind and body.

I felt a mighty pull. The black and white outlines began to form the shape of a new scenery.

Are you okay, boy?

I groaned, banging my head to clear the nasty headache that soon followed my return to consciousness.

"Boy?" I frowned at the gender term. Had that voice been talking to me?

"Affirmative. Your physical attributes would see you of the female type, but your chi count is of a volume belonging to the male counterpart. Therefore, I calculate that you are a male hiruda inside a female host," said a clinical voice.

I saw an animachine wearing a lucky blue and dragon gold full body uniform, similar to the type Forneas wore. Unlike Forneas, this animachine's head was a fox, with two small round dishes for ears and a rod poking up from the top of his forehead. A gold star was pinned to his right breast; the same star as the one the Evadale Knights wore on their ties and caps.

"Um, I'm not a hiruda." I corrected the animachine.

"Well, my analysis does calculate a probable chance of 0.5 percent of you being some other creature." The animachine was adamant his analysis hadn't been wrong.

"My analysis tells me you're one hundred percent wrong," I argued.

"Stevie. Please provide the real statistics. Is this male creature dangerous," said another voice, which was deep and stoic like the one that made me unconscious.

The animachine paused before it returned with an answer.

"Whilst Charlese-sama is a skilled force magis. Her body's mana has dampened tremendously, rendering her incapable of magic abilities."

I frowned at the fox animachine and turned my head to the sound of the other voice.

"Uncle Smithsonian?!" I accidentally blurted when I saw a grandpa version of Wilfred sporting a bushy black beard that ran the length of his round chin, so the tips were a finger span away from his collarbone.

A navy-blue Lincoln top hat added a few graces of height to him. He wore a different version of the Evadale Knight navy-blue attire, being a single breasted jacket, opened to reveal his double-breasted vest with gold buttons running parallel lengths down his torso, white cotton shirt and black silk cravat with the ends tucked into his vest. I was impressed by his well-kept physique of long legs in navy-blue slacks, a lean waist and stomach (free from a pot-belly), and broad shoulders. A well-worn double belt, with a gun holstered to his right and short sword sheathed to his left, was evenly balanced on his hips. It was clear he was a gentleman of action. My mind wandered to a memory of sketched men modeling various fashions in Bulldog's secret books.

I frowned at his steel cap boots. The edges of his soles were capped in steel as well. Why steel?

"Boy - I do not believe we have had the pleasure." Uncle Smithsonian frowned, rather perplexed by my outburst. "How have we met?"

I gulped. Damn my stupid mouth. "Aah, no, just something in this head."

"Ganmo. Good, you're alright."

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard Leinard's voice. I turned towards him and realized that I was sitting on cold grass, underneath a bushy canopy of an ancient elm tree in full bloom.

A quick glance of the rest of my surroundings made me realized I had somehow been magically zapped from the Triuta Floor to outside somewhere.

I looked up toward the sky and blinked at the glaring blue visage. It was a lot different to the daylight from Apocalypse's Second District.

"Ganmo's your name?" Uncle Smithsonian chuckled. "Let me guess, your surname is Doki, right?"

"How'd you know?" I acted surprised and cursed my growling stomach. "More importantly, do you have any because I'm starving?"

"No." He blatantly confirmed.

"Where are we?" Leinard asked to change the subject.

"About a quarter of acres within the forest behind Marlo's mansion. Still, within his lands, unfortunately," Uncle Smithsonian answered.

"Thank you, Deacon." Leinard bowed before the man. "If you hadn't arrived when you did, our mission would've failed."

Mission?

"I hope placing our fair Trix through his torture was worth it, Leinard. What did you find out?" Deacon asked.

I wobbled to my feet, using the elm for my support and let out a shiver at the chills that ran up my legs. My stocking feet were drenched with moist foliage. I wrapped my arms tightly around myself and instinctively cupped my breasts to keep them warm.

"Toasty. So, this is why women have breasts," I mumbled to myself, impressed with a fact I had discovered about the opposite species.

The odd looks from the men made me flinch, feeling awkward.

It was the first time I noticed other men had surrounded us. All of them wore the familiar uniform of an Evadale Knight; the dark patchwork overcoat, navy-blue suit fitted with belts and straps to contain their weapons and small equipment and calf-length black lace-up boots. Their ties carried the single gold star emblem of the group.

"So you're not a woman, normally." Cass cringed.

I turned to the sound of his voice, realizing he had been sitting next to me the whole time. I dropped my hands to my sides, then wrapped them around my cold arms again.

"Of course I'm a woman! My hands were cold! I'm bloody freezing!" I pouted, involuntarily keeping my hands snug under my breasts again.

An overcoat was draped over my shoulders to keep me warm.

"Buddha bless you!" I thanked the kind man as I pulled the coat over myself. I flinched when I saw a younger version of Colin.

"A woman's body must be kept modest," he signed, expecting that I'd understand what his fingers were saying.

"Girls don't go feeling up their own tits in front of boys. Trollops do that." Trix's voice crudely butted in. He poked his head out behind Cass's back, so I could see his cheesy smirk.

"I wasn't feeling them up." I snarled back at him.

"Your hand was fondling them."

"Were not, you perverted bastard!" I argued back.

"Boys, please! This matter of conversation is unbecoming. Youth!"

Deacon scolded us.

He drew my attention back to him and the group of knights to his back. I roughly counted there were about twelve strapping young men with sober expressions.

"Regardless of who or whatever you are, your body is still Charlese-sama's, correct?" he asked.

"I suppose. I only remember being in this body," I carefully answered.

How much could I trust these men with the truth of why I was here? If they knew about the impending invasion of Zyon, the Lotus Bridge being out of order and humanity in danger of becoming kaput, what would be their immediate reaction?

My mind ran through a series of likely responses and neither of them saw me avoiding heighten emotions and annoying explanations.

"Good, well let's start with an extraction of intel from Charlese-sama, shall we?" Uncle Smithsonian declared with a sinister undertone to his voice.

"Hang on there a moment! Whaddyah mean by extraction?! What the heck is that?!" I shivered with fear at what Wilfred and Lita's eccentric uncle was keen to do to me.

As I recall from that brief played memory when I was with the juxtapositioner demon, the man liked to play with machines. Bulldog had always said men who have the meddlesome mind of machines were dangerous.

"Nothing you're not already familiar in doing." Leinard sighed. "It won't hurt. In fact, you tend to enjoy it."

"I'm still scared." I nervously gulped, securing Colin's overcoat further around my body.

"Can we have ten minutes, Deacon?" Leinard asked the man.

"Of course. Learn what you can from her body, Leinard." Deacon cheerfully agreed. His beard twitched with his smile.

"Creepy!" I shivered.

"Come on, let's find a private place for us." Leinard cordially offered with a smooth voice.

I cursed my pounding heart beats.

He took my hand and led me to a set of elms where their leafy canopy formed walls to make a shallow cave. It was away from the view of the men and hidden further within the forest. Leinard called upon a spell to

clear away unwanted bits and make it a cozy space for us.

"Um, what are you doing?" I glanced about the makeshift cave, feeling like he had set up a love nest.

I gulped when Leinard sat down within the cave's center and beckoned for me to join him. His gray eyes were relaxed; cheeks lightly flushed. Almost as if he was aroused. My face blushed beetroot. This was bad. Really, bad.

I closed my eyes, released a few deep breaths to calm myself, and opened them again. The man before me was still the same Leinard in need of release. It seemed that what we were about to do may actually provide an answer to how I would be able to free him from the primary core.

I snuggled up close to his side, taking in his warmth. My heart slowed and eyes drooped, relaxed. Leinard placed his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his side, so I could hear his heart beats. They were fast. I glanced up to meet his eyes.

"Why is my heart beating fast?" Leinard whispered with a ragged breath.

Like hell, I was going to tell him. I answered with a kiss.

"Ganmo," his voiced heated my ears.

His tongue explored both familiar and new territory of my (Charlese's) body. My clothes were fiercely stripped away, leaving me naked in his arms. I did the same for him until the only heat we felt was coming from our bodies connected in sex.

"Open your mind to me." Leinard's deep voice heated my ears.

I felt stars whirl about my vision, reversing the darkness, so what was dark was white with light black silhouettes and outlines. My heart panicked with a thought that shadow puppets were about to attack us.

"It's okay Ganmo. This is normal!" Leinard reassured me and buried my fears with more of his soothing touches and kisses.

I relaxed into his embrace until I felt euphoria. My spirit felt unrestrained. The reversed darkness had colors of pink and purple creep into some of the outlines. Blurred figures moved about my vision, slowly drawing focus until I was seeing a completely different scenery.

"That's it. Please show me." Leinard's voice sailed in and out of my ears.

I saw a man with a deep scar on his cheek, standing before an enormous

telescope of a strange nature.

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I strolled down aisles of workbenches cluttered with metal and rubber parts spread across their surfaces.

Iron cogs of all sizes, were being pushed into metal pin-boards by elderly workmen in tanned allover suits, which covered their bodies from neck to ankle like one big rice sack. Their heads were kept ambiguous, with their uniformed flat caps branded with the Illuminate Group's crescent moon motif.

"Is the quota on target?" The question came out of my mouth. It was directed to a graybeard man who was working a set of cog pin-boards.

I glanced at his wrinkly hands that were filthy with dirt and grime.

"Ai, Milady," the graybeard man timidly answered, bowing his head lower, so I was no longer able to see his face.

"Do not disappoint if you want to see your family again." I harshly reminded the man.

I carried on with my slow parade down the aisle. Eventually entering into the steel works of the manufacturing line.

The constant banging on steel jarred my eardrums. I readjusted my tie to ease the discomfort I felt from the rush of heat coming out of the steaming cauldron and kettledrums with loud hisses.

My nose tickled from the stench of iron mixed with sweat and grim.

The group used the women to mold the metal into parts, as their hands were more suited for detailed work. Their children were quick to move cooled parts to the elderly men of the assembly line.

I stared at the women and children working, taking note of their tanned overalls and long-sleeved shirts. Their identities were also obscured under their branded flat caps.

No one made small talk or moved unnecessarily; they worked silently like machines. It was satisfying to see. This meant that High King Sirius's quota was going to meet the projected target as per plan.

Although, a minor hiccup occurred before me when one of the manufacturing boys tripped at my feet. He dropped a tray carrying valuable cogs all about the dirty concrete floor.

Today had been going so well too.

The boy bowed low with apology and scurried about to quickly regather the parts back to the tray. He had managed to retrieve all the parts, but he was still in my way.

I gestured for the boy to place the tray on the bench without dropping it. He compiled and made a noise when I pulled out my gun.

"Turn around," I ordered the boy.

He slowly turned. I shot him in the back with a shrill bullet. The boy imploded into glitter before all the workers of the manufacturing line.

"Let this serve as a warning. Do not miss your quotas. Definitely, do not make any error in front of me again!" I threatened them, screwing up my nose at the glitter scattered near my polished black boots. "Someone, clean up this mess."

The workers didn't stop with their tasks, but acknowledged my orders with obedient nods.

I sighed and left the area, making my way up a set of grilled metal stairs and a viewing platform.

The view from the top showed the outlay of an enormous, open warehouse. On one side was the manufacturing process lines. The remaining space was filled with a massive telescope supported on an oversize dolly cart.

The machine was a glorious creation of gold, iron and bronze with silver-glass dermaleech material trimming the edges and forming a pattern of the Sol constellation on the front lens. Its cylinder body was enormous enough to punch a clean hole through the warehouse's wall. In place of the lens viewing area was a miniature planetarium machine balanced on shimmering winged platforms, which flanked either side of the body near the declination setting circle. The back-end viewing area was a triangular prism, propped up by two mirrored flaps that resembled a large portspell.

The machine whirred and emitted warmth and vibrations, which stirred a tingling sensation along my arms.

"I saw your display of leadership back at the manufacturing line. Always one for lasting impressions, are we not?" said a heavy, formal voice.

I greeted my scar face superior as I assumed my place by his side. He was watching the labor on the telescope like a hawk.

His stance was firm and tall, with his black gloved hands clasped

behind his back, so his broad chest was puffed out.

As per other members of The Illuminate Group, he wore the tanned uniform of a high ranking officer. His colored merit stripes were pinned, pristine, to his right breast pocket of his buttoned-up jacket. A single row of shining brass buttons ran the middle length of his long torso. The official tanned tie and white shirt were visible within the jacket's spread area. A tanned utility belt held a number of pouches toward the right side of his waist. Whilst his left side supported a gun holster to his hip. A leather belt crisscrossed his chest and back area to reinforce the weight of the gun to his belt.

He looked at me, so I could clearly distinguish his features. His head was covered with an officer's stiff peaked cap, sporting the insignia of a commander. His skin was of the pale kind; clean-shaven and showing no wrinkles or laugh lines for a man his age; nose was the right point and flatness to the bridge. Even his cheekbones were symmetrically aligned. The only attribute that didn't belong on his perfectly handsome face was the deep silver scar-line, which ran from the bottom of his left eyelid to the corner of his lips.

Shrewd gray eyes peered at me with an unreadable expression.

"The people must always be reminded of their purpose and status in life," I coldly answered his question.

"So you end the boy's life because he was out of his position." The commander confirmed.

"I ended his life because he was due to expire anyway."

"Arlingdon-sama. If you are to rise in ranks successfully, you are still required to hold some sympathy toward the lower classes. Otherwise, we may face another civil contention," he said.

His voice remained level, but his words grated on my nerves. Why should I bother with the lower class? They were nothing but sheep, exerting all their efforts just to make some measly daro for food. If they couldn't bring themselves up the ranks and formulate wealth, they were not worthy of my sympathy.

My thoughts were distracted with history lessons on the civil contention. The whole affair was a joke. I was glad I was still a child when the ordeal came to a conclusion. Life would have been a nightmare if High Prince Brystagg had succeeded over High King Sirius. Surely, Leinard and his awful brother would appreciate that fact.

"Bothersome," I muttered under my breath.

The commander smirked. "Well, you're still young."

The conversation moved to production updates. I was pleased to inform him of my success with the manufacturing quotas. I was proud of my achievements towards making the High King's Sol Savior Telescope a success to date. My father was never short of ability in making our kingdom a better place. His ideas for world expansion were admirable.

"Good. Also, what were you able to gather from that Aueralius boy?" he asked.

My heart plummeted to a murky depth. Of course, the commander would be obliged to ask, since he had ordered me to extract intelligence from Leinard.

As the man, Troy Hale, would it not bother him that I was sleeping with another man? Weren't we lovers? Remove the fact of me being a succubus from the equation, Troy's order was asking for my infidelity. It felt disconcerting.

Then there was the rapid draining of my chi whenever I used my powers in sex. The effect was tripled when the other person held a high amount of mana. Ten minutes with Leinard was enough to put me into a coma for a short span.

Despite Leinard being the son of the enemy, we had a mutual understanding that made us friends. However, we weren't lovers and having sex with him was harder on me for this reason. I cared for our friendship.

Trent, on the other hand, could revert to null. If he wasn't his twin, I'd shove a shrill down his tacky throat and bask in his leftover glitter.

"Since he's been stationed as a servant, he hasn't been able to make any progress on his orders. All I could gather was that the Evadale Order had tasked him with an askew instruction to 'play servant'." The information rolled off my tongue. I flinched at the fuming expression on Troy's face.

"Commander Hale?" I swallowed a nervous gulp.

He cupped my chin with his large gloved hand and squeezed tight.

"You've slept with him many times, yet this is all the information you could gather?!" Troy hissed with vehemence.

He squeezed tighter, so my jaw ached with threats of being crushed. Tears were squeezed out of my eyes.

"He's re...strict...ed," I ungracefully spat out.

Troy released my chin. I assumed a moment to recompose myself.

"I suppose Marlo has been keeping too much watch on the boy. Yes, you're right, he needs more reason to move freely. Hmm..." He looked at me with an idea forming.

"Become more of his ally. Let him believe you are on his side to rescue his brother. Yes, that will be your redeeming grace."

I groaned. "I don't want to sleep with him. Please don't make me Troy."

Troy offered a gentle smile. He grabbed my hand and led me off the platform and into a utility room, where he chased out the workman, so we could be alone. He closed the door.

I was yanked toward his chest, where he slowly undid my uniform, kissing a trail of pleasure along my naked skin. He bent me over some crates, so my backside was exposed. I felt air chill my naked buttocks. The chills were soon replaced with warmth from feathery touches and wet kisses teasing my skin. I trembled with an ache to feel him inside me.

"Troy, please," I begged him.

I moaned aloud as I felt him ram my hole with his member, thrusting in deep, so I was burning with pain and pleasure. My voice let out unseemly noises as he teased and played with my breasts whilst continuing to ram into my pleasure spots.

"Will you do as I say?" he whispered into my ear.

"Yes." I moaned. "YES!"

He continued to drive into me until we both climaxed. There was no lover's comedown embrace as I had hoped. He quickly pulled out, redressed and moved towards the door.

"Lieutenant Arlingdon-sama. I trust you understand where our relationship lies," Troy said before opening the door and leaving me behind.

I made sure my appearance was of a pristine officer again before I headed out to carry out my new orders.

"Forgive me Leinard." I sighed.

I left the warehouse.

I made my way back to Marlo's mansion to prepare myself for a party.

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"I won't sleep with you anymore," Leinard said when I came round.

I groggily sat up and saw he was already dressed to go.

He waited for me to redress in my clothes and helped me reclaim my decency.

I frowned. I was so convinced that Charlese had been in love with Leinard. Those heart flutters and insistent urges to be held by him and be at his side were strong feelings. She must have been thinking about that Troy guy when she was with him. It must've been that.

"Yeah, probably better you don't. This body needs to get a clue about what love actually is and the value of chastity. I haven't helped, being carried away with the moment." I sighed. "I think I've got a handle on that now."

The sick feeling in my stomach at what I had discovered of Charlese was my trigger on holding back.

From that memory of hers, I realized she was still impressionable despite being my age. I mean, I wasn't wise like Shuso, but I think I had a better grasp of reality than her. To shoot a boy under ten summers because he was predestined to die or, worse, was in her way was disgusting. The lower class were just animals to her. I understood Trix's dislike.

At least, I was relieved to know that the body's succubus urges were to blame for me jumping Leinard's bones. By War's knowledge, they were a special breed of human who were known for their seduction to beguile men. They were held in favor of the Royal Court for centuries. Most of the families were prominent and had direct relationships with the king and his family.

"Hey Colonel, I'm not Charlese, you know that, right?" I looked into his gray eyes.

He held my gaze for a moment before lowering his eyes toward the dirtied gloves I had yet to put back on.

"Yeah. I'm sorry for sleeping with you, won't do it anymore." He quietly apologized and stood.

I noticed his shoulders were bunched and head downcast as he walked away from me. He looked heart broken. I didn't understand what made him crush on her so badly. Was it the sex? Must have been. I felt relieved he had been rejected. She wasn't a good match for him at all.

"Hey Colonel, do you know a Lita Smithsonian?" I called out to his

back to vary the subject.

He stopped and faced me.

"Lethal Lita? Deacon's niece? Yeah, why?" Leinard innocently replied.

His label for Lita made me burst with laughter. "Oh man, she'll clobber you one if she heard that."

Leinard groaned and pointed to a light scar on the back of his shoulder. "She already has with a miniature kangaroo-bot."

That was enough to make me keel over with a laughing fit. Leinard's expression lighten with his lips stretched in a wry smile.

"I do think Charlese values you," I said once I had calmed down, hoping I had softened some of his heartache.

"I know she does as a friend, but finding out that sex with me was a chore is, well, I knew she felt that way. I guess I was hoping something would spark between us." Leinard sighed. "Ironic. The first time I felt we were making love was when someone else had possession of her body."

He sounded less depressed.

"You fell in love with her." I gently reassured him. "Being in love is nothing wrong. I mean, my eldest brother was brutally dumped in front of an army of Neska Gudari. His fake lover publicly tortured him. So, I think you were let down easy there."

"Humph, isn't it weird that I'm getting consoled for being dumped from the mouth of the girl who's indirectly dumped me," he said with his one-brow look.

"Aah, yeah, sometimes I forget I'm not in my body." I scratched my head, feeling awkward.

We dropped the love talk and changed our conversation to lighter topics as he made our way back to the group. We filled everyone in on what we both had seen from that memory.

"Also, this body is off limits to anyone. You as much as leer at my lady bumps, I'll... do something you don't like!" I gave the men my ultimatum with a firm frown and raised fist.

I tighten Colin's overcoat over myself, so I resembled something of a patchwork sack.

"Like anyone would! I know you're not Charlese, but seeing this body before me makes me wanna hurl chunks." Trix answered back.

He received a nastier insult from me in return.

We slung more insults at each other to initiate a gun fight.

"ENOUGH!" Deacon's yelling rang through our ears to stop our fighting.

"This is why we shouldn't use children to fight wars," he heaved a weary sigh.

I handed back the gun I had stolen from Colin's holster.

He snatched it from my hands with a rude finger and expression of warning.

"Okay, now that we have order. Let's discuss this Sol Savior we've learned from Leinard." Deacon called everyone's attention around him.

"I'm worried that it could be a weapon." Leinard turned to me with a sober expression.

He directed his question to me. "What do you think it is since you're in her body?"

"Yeah, but I'm thinking like myself." I blurted.

"Like dat's gunna get us anywhere," groaned a stranger.

I frowned at the knight standing next to Colin. His hair was a fiery red like War's, he even had the same green colored eyes. He also looked about War's age (of the present time) and had a similar muscly body. His face was full of light freckles, some dotting along his nose and along his cheeks, which made him appear younger and with a bit of cheek.

"Um, don't wanna sound rude, but I will. Who the hell are you?" I blatantly asked the red-head knight.

"Gavin," Gavin grumbled like his name was being forced out of him.

Colin stepped forward and introduced the other two guys next to him. Next to Gavin was Miller, who was a lanky boy of my age with a stoic face that looked like it had never cracked a smile. Then Andy, whose long silver hair was held back in a ponytail; his face was wide with a large chin, narrow set eyes and high cheekbones. He seemed to be about the same age as Death of my present time.

Deacon continued with the rest of the introductions.

"So this is everyone, Ganmo. Now, please answer Leinard's question. Can you tell us more?"

I felt the black beard man's question heating up my cheeks. Looks like I was going to have to give them something, so decided to let the instincts of this body do the talking.

I deeply exhaled, opened my mouth and began to speak.

"I think," I began to speak, then stopped.

My mind wasn't in the right state for words. I thanked my training back at Gat Shiem and all the long hours Bulldog had me performing Zanshin in the pond to make my body more fluid and responsive to attack and counterattacks.

I stilled my heart and mind, tuning into the sounds and movements of Charlese's body.

Through a state of Mushin and stance of Zanshin, I was able to learn that the Sol Savior was intended as a harvesting tool to gather chiorntex power at a vast magnitude, which would be used for a greater purpose Charlese wasn't aware of. There was something else I saw within her body, I wasn't sure whether I should tell Leinard.

I provided an answer to the Evadale Knights' question.

"What?" I naively asked, noticing the silent shock from the men.

"Lass, dat be Zen?" Gavin blinked with disbelief at what he saw.

"You're a monk?! A hiruda monk?!" Cass gasped. "Oddly, this makes sense. Yet still confusing."

"I'm not a monk," I coolly answered Cass.

"B-But you did Mushin. I'm pretty sure that's what it was. As far as I know, only monks from Gat Shiem know this."

I raised my eyes, trying to work out how I was going to address his comment that wouldn't spurn on other pesky questions.

"Anyway, we know what our king and Illuminate Group are working on. So, I think we should redirect our attention on what purpose is driving the manufacturing of that telescope." Leinard broke in to draw the men's attention back to the matter at hand.

I sighed, feeling thankful for his intervention.

The knights began tossing in theories that stirred healthy arguments on the matter. They eventuated on one theory, High King Sirius was seeking world power to retain his autocracy.

"If Our Highness was able to wield the power of Chiorntex, fashion Sol to his whim..." Cass ended his comment with a shudder.

It was a scary thought.

"He's the High King? Do we even have the right to intervene on the matter?"

"Knights. Do not forget our credo and our role as the independent faction. Oreka bilatzen dugu ordena mantentzeko (We seek balance to

keep order). As per the blood pledge made between our king and the order's founder - High Prince Brystagg." Deacon firmly reminded the knights. "If the High King, himself, is planning to tip a balance, we must correct this as per our credo."

"Then I offer the Evadale Knight Order my assistance," intruded a woman's voice.

I observed a woman wearing the tanned uniform of a senior officer. The curves of her body were mature, as well as her calm two-tone brown-green eyes. She appeared to be the same age as Deacon.

"Admiral Addison. Here for the party are we?" Deacon superficially greeted her and her two junior officers at her rear.

"The party is over, Deacon, and no. I'm here for the same reason you are, to see what our gracious king is up to." Admiral Addison answered without mincing her words. "And, what my star pupils are hiding from me."

Her eyes showed a fleeting expression of shock when they noticed me standing next to Leinard and Colin.

"Why are you still standing here?" she asked me.

"Excuse me?"

"Clinton!" she shouted a boy's name.

A lanky, freckled face boy, whose hands were trembling by his side, stepped forward.

"Ma'am!" He boldly saluted the Admiral, keeping is eyes forward, so they were staring at an elm.

"Didn't your report mention on Lady Charlese's loss of life by the hand of a manufacturing woman?" she asked, whilst keeping her eyes fixed on me like a hawk.

"Ma'am, yes Ma'am! One of our Scouts saw a factory worker shoot Lieutenant Arlingdon-sama in the back with a normal bullet. He apprehended the culprit. We called for a medic who declared Lieutenant Arlingdon-sama's chi count to null." Clinton reported.

"As you were, Sergeant." The Admiral dismissed Clinton, sending him back to his place behind her.

"So, I can say my men were incompetent with their report. Or, you are a hiruda who had taken advantage of a lucky break." She concluded.

"He is a hiruda name Ganmo, Admiral." Stevie cheerfully confirmed on her suspicions.

My heart fell into a disarray. Charlese was no more? A stinging sensation to my back and nausea surfaced; the body's way to confirm the fact. I glanced at Leinard and sighed at his expressionless face.

"Wow, I'm... shit," Trix mumbled with as much confusion and mixed feelings on the matter.

"Aside from Arlingdon-sama's passing, your reason for approaching us is?" Leinard moved the conversation back to business.

The Admiral gave him a satisfied smile. "You would've made a wonderful successor to the king."

She sighed and exchanged information about Sirius's plans to absorb an ultimate power, so he could wield the magic of a god. He had stumbled on ancient scripts that foretold of a great feeding occurring during a once off planetary alignment. The prophecy indicated sibling planets would be feeding power into Sol's magic moon at that time. Making Sol one big power cell.

"No one knows when the Sol Universe will be aligned, but scholars suspect it occurring within one or two years." She concluded her information.

"So, if he points the telescope to the moon at that time, he'll be able to take power into himself?" I blurted my question.

"Something like that. Although, he would already need to be in possession of lesser chiorntex powers to negate damaging effects." Her eyes shrewdly observed for my response.

"Um, well, like the fabled Power of Null?" I mumbled my question and shuffled awkwardly on the spot, feeling bothered by her heated gaze.

"Something like that," she answered.

My mind connected pieces. So, this was the beginning.

"Considering these facts, I offer you a proposition to monitor his next plans. Your payment will be from the Blood Pledge coffers, of course. For those who sign up, there are land rights and titles of status to be awarded. Not to mention a generous salary," she said, dangling a bait before the knights.

"What do we need to do for this generous and sizable package?" Deacon soberly asked.

He was obviously weary about her offer.

"What you knights normally do, monitor and maintain order."

"Where?" Deacon prompted for more.

"Apocalypse. More specifically, in the kingdom's maximum prison facility, Hell's Labyrinth."

A stir of shock and outcry came from the knights, which was silenced by Deacon's order.

"I will give you a day to think it over. I give you reassurance that my men will not pursue your knights and intelligence officers any further." Her eyes darted to Leinard and Trix.

"Admiral Smithsonian, this is a golden opportunity to seize the heart of the matter before it breaks order. I would not waste it."

Admiral Addison tipped her stiff peak officer's hat to Deacon and his men. She retreated back through the forest path that lead to the mansion. Her escorts followed at her heels.

The knights fell into a heavy discussion.

Leinard pulled me to one side and asked me a direct question. I noticed his eyes showed an expression of pain.

"I'm sorry about Charlese." I blurted before he could get a word in.

He heaved with a weary sigh and nodded. "I need to ask you, are you from Hell's Labyrinth?"

I gulped down a knot of nerves.

"Charlese lost her life because of her work for our king. I know she wasn't the best person. If I told her my feelings. Something might have changed in her. If I said I loved her. I..." His voice trailed off.

Tears dropped from his eyes. He closed them, released a deep sigh. When he opened them, his tears stopped falling. His expression was one of resolution.

"Are you from this place that the Admiral was talking about?"

I pressed my lips together to form an answer. One word come out.

"Yes."

"Okay," Leinard replied.

Trix and all the others faced me with a single burning question.

"What's this Hell's Labyrinth like?"

I answered with an appropriate answer.

"Not telling. Figure it out for yourself." I childishly huffed.

"Well, you heard the man. Let's go figure it out, aye, Leinard?" Trix flashed his brother a cheesy, tacky, and most comforting smile in all of Sol.

"I guess," Leinard agreed with lackluster.

"I think, saying this from Charlese's body, she would feel honored you're doing your duty. As a friend, she would've wanted you to pour your love on a special someone who'd receive it in like." I gently reassured him.

Leinard smiled and leaned in close to my ear, so his whisper could only be heard by me. "Truth is, I think I accidentally fell in love with someone else. What should I do about it?"

I raised my brows with shock, never pegging him for a flighty romantic.

"Ouch!" I cursed when I felt a stinging sensation to my back.

It increased intensity, so I wasn't able to stand. I heard the knights' curse aloud when all my nerves went haywire. I couldn't stop my convulsions nor the banging feeling in my head, the ringing in my ears and stabbing needles all over my skin. Pain was everywhere.

Blue links flailed through the air and roped around my limbs to tie me down.

The knights shouted with panic when Leinard drop to the ground next to me in a sudden unconscious state.

I turned to the see the side of him and saw glowing blue links of light slide off his body, making his limbs twitch involuntarily. They snaked themselves over mine own to bind me to the ground. Tips of light struck my eyes. My vision was turning black.

"Ganmo! Leinard! Stay with me!" Trix's voice sliced in and out of my hearing.

Gan...mo... His voice broke off into distant syllables.

I was blind to the world. The only sound in my ears was ringing.

Let's Get Smashed!

My heart pounded with threats of breaking my rib cage.

Vision seeped into my blindness; returning the color white and gradually other hues and tones.

I felt cold, wet and unable to stop my trembling body.

"He's going into a seizure." I heard a rushed voice over my head. "His breathing's stopped. Damn it!"

There was a sensation of a mouth covering mine; air was forced into my windpipe. I felt my chest being pumped, but I couldn't move.

Eventually, light and warmth returned to me. I saw electrostatic gray space retaining a horde of demons. Their images surfaced in and out of the cloudy atmosphere.

"I'm... back." I laid still to reclaim my senses.

"Damn it! They're seizing again!" I recognized Brystagg's voice to my left.

I managed to force my head to the side, so I could see what was going on.

Brystagg and Colin were trying to contain the Aueralius Brothers' seizing bodies, so they couldn't cause damage to themselves.

Trix and Leinard were out of the primary core, but convulsing about the floor near me.

Self-control for my own body rapidly returned.

I felt disturbed by the sight of Leinard's eyes rolling back within their sockets.

"Damn it! Lasai lasai, askatu bere erregealdia!" Brystagg shouted out his spell.

Blue starlight descended over the brothers, making their skin glow a bluish-white. They had stopped seizing, but were still unconscious.

I recalled Bulldog's lessons of stillness and allowing my instincts to control my actions. I dragged myself to Leinard and Trix, placed my hands over them and said words that came from my heart.

Lat revertetur ad me amor perdidit. Amica mea revertetur ad me.

The blue light transitioned to green, which grew bright and pulsated throughout the brothers' bodies.

"Et revertetur," I whispered. One final call to bring them back.

Any ego links that were tied to the brothers vanished. The green light returned color and restored some fluids back to them before burning out with a blinding flash. When I had readjusted to the regular lighting of the Lotus Bridge, I saw stirred movements from their bodies.

"Thank heavens." Brystagg let out a sigh of relief.

"Famine. I'm sorry. I know you're still recovering, but your brother is on his last ounce of chi."

I glanced to the primary core and saw Death looking ragged within the trunk of gold light. He was still standing, barely. If he were to collapse when the core was still damaged, all our efforts would be for nothing.

I forced myself, unsteadily, to my feet and dragged myself to stand next to Death; miraculously not touching the spinning coins to tip the platform. Death held my arm to keep me steady. Gold light was able to sustain our bodies and keep us propped up for the time being.

"Well done, Baby Brother." Death swallowed. "Let's finalize this."

Flickers of gold light and dark shadows moved past my line of sight. I stared at my belt pouch. I didn't know if I would survive what I was about to do with Death, but I wanted Small Cap to have a chance.

"Hey, Sire, can you take care of Small Cap for me?" I raised my gaze to Brystagg whose hazy body (due to the wall of gold light) was moving towards me.

"I'll treat him well," Brystagg reassured me when he gently received Small Cap's sleeping body in his hands.

I sighed when he carefully placed him in his breast pocket. It was the first time I saw the high prince smile gently to another living creature.

"Okay, let's do this." I returned my focus to the task at hand.

"While you were under with that man, I deduced the next course of actions," Death said.

He rephrased the analogy of playing a record on a gramophone.

"I'll be able to hold the events of this time, but you need to revert all the changes."

I frowned, wondering how I was going to do that.

"We have to first set the labyrinth's point of origin back to a zero..." Death frowned.

He whacked my shoulders to make sure I wasn't zoning out. His abrupt scolding made him wheeze for breath.

"I was listening. Return to zero, got it!" I grumbled, rubbing my fresh ache better.

"Famine, you're the only one with power to revert." Death's frown eased.

His eyes fluttered, fighting to stay awake.

"Death. Start the process."

"Wait. You need a fixed return point." Leinard's weak voice entered my mind. "Trix's mapglass."

"Colonel, I, you, please..." My mind fumbled for words.

Leinard's eyes were fighting to stay open, so they could continue to see me.

I gulped and nodded. "Colin, pass me Trix's mapglass."

Colin carefully removed the monocle patch from Trix and handed it to me.

Gold light danced about the lens, casting fractured rainbow patterns on the silver-glass surface. Of course, dermaleeches.

I fitted the mapglass to my right eye and nearly stumbled out of the primary core trunk at the sudden disorientation I felt. So, this was the world that Trix saw within his right eye.

The Lotus Bridge inverted to a luminous blue-white light, running smoothly across the space. Every dust particle twinkled as blue-white or black starlight against blaring orange space. Near-blinding bluish lightening sliced through white clouds. Every movement transitioned extremely fast and smooth. It felt like life was moving a picture frame at a time.

"Eek!" I yelped at the sight of Death's face.

"What?" Death looked worried.

"You look like a demon," I commented.

I further explained on how I was able to see every line and dark shadowy patch of his skin like someone had picked up a paint brush and drawn thick black outlines all over his features. His eyes were the freakiest hellish orange.

"You know I don't look like this." Death complained. I noticed the aura around him flash bright red before calming to a muddled yellow.

I shook my head free from irrelevant thoughts and focused on what I

wanted to see.

"How do I connect to this mapglass?" I asked aloud.

"Trix mentioned he entered a state of mushin in order to see all."

I nodded my head, closed my eyes and entered a state of mushin with steady breaths.

A rush of tunnel paths looped, turned and got tangled about each other in my head.

I felt the flow of time tug and pull at my senses, making my nerves twitch with impatience. The paths were moving in random patterns, smashing into others and breaking down pivot landings.

I was able to see shadow impressions of the tunnel's previous, current and should be positions. One path that should have moved to the top-left grid of the South Wing was moving towards the bottom-center of the West Wing. All paths were not where they should logical flow to or their past position had been forcefully altered, making it difficult to get a fix on where to restore.

I delved deeper into my consciousness, connecting to the mapglass.

I saw scrawled black lines on a white canvas looping, crossing and connecting to each other to form big labyrinth patterns. Maps.

I sieved through a number of maps, but none felt like they were for the time prior to the moment the hiruda had started changing things.

"The time we found you. Go... back," Leinard answered for me. "Two full moons."

"How'd I know it's the right one?"

"Listen to your heart... like you did... before." Leinard's voice drifted into silence. He had reached his limit of consciousness.

I grabbed Death's hand and held it tight.

We gave each other encouragement before we closed our eyes and opened up our hearts.

I focused on the timing of Death's pulse to still my own movements.

Quiet both in sound and emotion, my heart opened. Pain became irrelevant as I transcended to a place outside myself.

I opened my inner eyes, and saw through the mapglass, the world as it was and how it should be. Two full moons of time wounded back until I saw myself lying on a shining blue floor.

I turned my head to change the pattern of fractured rainbow light. A new image was reassembled before me.

I was standing next to Trix on the Lotus Bridge. There was a fence of white light running around the hexagon edges; the energy forming from the platform's steaming pipes.

Trix called upon a spell to wrap his hands and feet in gold light that attracted an amount of gold coins to him. He used his body to move the coins in the air, manipulating them to form a pattern of pathways. A map of Hell's Labyrinth. This map was a pattern of a six pointed star within another six pointed star of a different rotation. The map of a heart.

Power tugged at my worldly consciousness, pulling me back into myself.

I opened my eyes and refocused my vision within the mapglass on that six pointed star pattern.

"I have a fix." A voice that sounded like my own broke my trance.

"Retrieving the zero point." Death's voice added, breaking him out of his own trance.

I felt the energy from his chi flow through my hand, making my skin tingle with a delicious warmth. My head slowed and became sluggish as the Power of Preservation wrapped a layer of white light around my thoughts of the Lotus Bridge until all movement in my thought was suspended.

"Reverting." I closed my eyes again and opened them to the six pointed star visible within the mapglass view.

The star glowed into an intense golden light, causing an impending combustion to occur.

I sieved through images in Death's mind until I found the tiniest one that had the most significance. The image of the time that matched zero point of origin for the labyrinth. It overlaid with the star map to form a perfect fit.

Noise banged and thumped against my eardrums. My body sped through sensations of burning, reforming, changing, expiring and moving; threatening to rip my heart out, shatter my bones and tear off my skin. It was pain, blinding unbearable pain!

Still my heart. Still my thoughts. Breathe...

Cold air soothed my worldly aches. I pushed past the pain and saw a bird's eye view of the labyrinth tunnels reforming to the six-star pattern, easing into place with solid clicks.

The destroyed pivot platforms had reverted to how they were. Electrostatic energy was reset to balance the chaotic, free roaming clouds of blue-white or black starlight particulars until their energies had waned.

A calmness and balance had resumed, placing a stop to minor contentions and unrest within the area.

The out of place and escaped prisoners and demons were forced back to their cells.

Darkness obscured Zyon's view, so there was no possibility of a tsazcuth. They couldn't cross over into Sol.

Hell's Labyrinth was restored.

My heart pounded with a crushing ache, closing off the Power of Null.

Darkness covered my view of the images within the mapglass. I felt myself falling out of the primary core.

"I have you." I heard a voice say.

My sensation of falling became a cozy, trustful feeling of being caught.

After a moment of stillness, I was able to open my eyes and frowned at the sight of Colin's tear stricken green orbs.

"Idiot." I groaned.

I allowed Colin to hug me tight with his thanks. Brystagg sat back and grinned to the stable gray ceiling space.

"Famine." Death's voice made me pull away from the hug.

Tears were streaming down his face, which glowed with relief and heighten pride.

He knelt next to me and joined in with the hug. Colin yanked Brystagg in, so the four of us were laughing and crying together like one big man ball.

Our joy increased when Small Cap groggily climbed out of Brystagg's pocket and jumped to my shoulder.

Death gently patted his tiny tuft of hair. "Good to see you, my friend."

We pulled away to recompose ourselves.

Small Cap resumed his place back in my belt pouch.

I focused on Leinard's unconscious body, stretched out on the ground.

A crude wolf whistle drew our attention to the intruding party that had landed on the Lotus Bridge.

Hearty laughter, joyful slaps on the back and stoic sighs of relief were heard and felt around the platform, which had assumed a moment of peace.

"Death." War stepped before him.

I was doing my best not to cry at the sight of my big brothers sharing a banter. It had been so long.

I felt a hand tug at my sleeve and looked at Leinard, who had returned to consciousness.

"I'm glad we saved your brother," he whispered.

"Don't speak. Rest."

"No, I want to see your good work."

Leinard forced himself to sit up with an awkward wobble; his eyes glistened with a smile. They widened when he came face to face with Brystagg next to him.

"You..." He swallowed the rest of his words.

Trix groaned to consciousness, with Saku fussing over him. His face went into an expression of shock when he saw Brystagg. He stumbled like he was about to collapse back to unconsciousness.

"You..." Trix said, repeating his brother's word.

My heartfelt light and full of fluffy happiness at the reunions all around me. No doubt, there was a lot of catching up to do.

I glanced at Lyra and Ryoko having a talk with Wilfred and Lita next to them. Brystagg speaking to his sons, who were still trying to fathom what they were seeing.

A sharp pang struck my head. I lowered my eyes, realizing my final task. Black energy particles swirled around my fingertips.

I rose to my feet and approached the primary core with a heavy feeling dragging my steps.

Sounds of cheerful laughter and casual conversation made me pause.

"Famine. Do what you need to do," Brystagg said at my back.

I faced him with sad eyes.

"I've made peace with my regrets." Lyra reassured me with a sideward glance to Ryoko. "Thank you for giving me the chance to see my daughter again."

I stared across to my friends, family and comrades. They met my stare with their resolve.

"It was an honor, Young Lord," Buru said as he stepped up to me. He

pulled out a bundle of cheese cloth from his pocket.

"For the road." He handed me the bundle and stood before the primary core.

Brystagg and Lyra followed. The three of them stood together, looking back at us.

I glanced to my blackened fingers, to the Aueralius Brothers, and back to Brystagg.

It had to be done.

I closed my eyes and called upon a spell that only the Power of Null could apply.

The word that would describe the mood of everyone was pensive. Conversations were kept at a minimum as we headed down the white corridors towards the lantern rooms.

It felt surreal what Death and I had achieved. Even more so with War walking ahead of me. He was carrying the sling stretcher, containing an unconscious Trix, with Ryoko. Death walked next to her, matching her pace.

My thoughts lingered on Leinard's unresponsive body in the stretcher Saku and Wilfred carried.

The Aueralius Brothers had lost consciousness soon after I had used my power to return Brystagg, Lyra and Buru back to their time. I was concerned it had caused some side effect on them. Was it because I had sent Brystagg back, being their blood relative? Or maybe because they had been linked to the primary core?

I couldn't understand why both brothers had instantly relapsed to unconsciousness as soon as Brystagg had disappeared from our time within a blink of an eye. When Death had reversed the lock around the fate held in stasis within my thoughts, they never resumed consciousness.

My eyes lowered towards the stone floor with a deep frown.

"How much further to a lantern room?" I called out to Lita who had assumed the lead.

"Just around the corner," she answered without turning around.

We turned a corner and into a corridor where rice paper doors (painted with pretty images of red cherry blossoms) were evenly positioned on either side.

Forneas was waiting for us in the middle of the corridor with Doctor

Samuel Mercer by his side.

"Place Captain Aueralius on the tatami mats in the fourth unit to the right," Samuel ordered War and Ryoko.

Both of them carried Trix into the fourth lantern room as instructed. Forneas and Death followed them inside.

"Lieutenant Colonel goes into the fourth one on the left," he instructed Wilfred and Saku.

I watched them take Leinard into the room.

"How'd you know we were coming?" I asked the weird doctor.

"I felt my kin's chi before chaos had occurred. Shortly afterward, those brothers' energies were mingled with my kin's. So, when my kin's chi was no longer present, I assumed you were on your way." His free eye seemed to twitch with a smile. Its glaring redness made his skin paler and creepier.

"Aah, so when you say kin, you're referring to the hiruda right?" I gulped and discreetly shuffled a few steps away from him.

Samuel chuckled. "You are correct. We're both of the Night Vamprous genus and hirudas. Unlike the one you faced, I'm only interested in using my mentor's body to fulfill his medical research that benefits humanity."

With his thin smile making his face resemble a hollow-eyed ghost, I wasn't particularly convinced.

Wilfred and Saku's reentry into the corridor, fortunately, interrupted our conversation.

"Will they be okay?" Wilfred asked Samuel.

"Those brothers? Most likely," Samuel stoically answered. "I've treated them for worse."

I gazed at the door that Wilfred and Saku had come out of, wondering if Leinard really was going to pull through.

"You can go see him if you want." Lita's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I sighed and shook my head. "No, it's alright. I'm sure he'll be fine soon."

She gave me a reassuring pat on my shoulder.

"Now, Famine, if you would be so kind as to enter the first room, so I can..." Samuel began to say.

I stopped Doctor Mercer before he could finish his order.

"I'm feeling fine. So, I'll be heading back with the others, maybe?" I rapidly blinked, with hope directed to Wilfred and the others.

Death, Ryoko and War entered the corridor. War was mumbling his complaints about stupid animachines and why he had to be jabbed with a zillion needles. He and Death were rubbing their left arms vigorously. They paused behind Lita and went quiet when they caught wind of what was going on.

Ryoko frowned. She grabbed my head and twisted my protesting face from side to side before letting go.

"You should have Doctor Mercer examine you," she near scolded me.

"No. I'm fine," I stubbornly answered back, keen to avoid a repeat of my last examination with that mad doctor.

She sighed. "Have it your way then."

"Corporal Kazama, I must protest! Famine and his brother were in direct contact with the primary core energies. Their roentgen levels need to be tested. Not to mention, I heard rumors of them wielding a strange power. There is no telling what health damages their bodies may be suffering, even if they say they are fine now!" Samuel argued.

"Listen, you quack of a doctor!" Ryoko stepped before him; her eyes narrowed and hands were pressed on her hips. "If Famine says he's fine, he's fine. I won't let you lock him or his brothers away to be your lab rats!"

My eyes widen with fear at the term 'lab rat'. I took further steps away from the doctor to be closer to my brothers.

"Preposterous! I am only thinking of their health!" Samuel challenged her stare and stance with his arms crossed. His white lab coat made him appear taller.

"Doesn't matter. He'll be coming back with us." She held her ground.

"On whose authority? You may be the interim leader of this squad as the corporal, but I have final say when it comes to the best interests of my patients' health!" Samuel wasn't giving in.

"I suppose your interests are in seeing the three brothers being stressed tested in a silo lab?" Ryoko continued to force the truth out of the good doctor.

"Of course. If the three of them hold rare power, it's prudent to learn all we can from them," he answered back.

I yelped at the truth. No way in hell was I being a lab rat for that mad

quack! I stepped in front of my brothers with determination to fight our way out of the corridor if needs be.

I heard Wilfred groaning and Lita release a weary sigh.

"No. Famine and his brothers are under my care and jurisdiction in place of Captain Aueralius, who is incapacitated, and Sergeant Ashdown who is absent." Ryoko laid down her decision.

"Sergeant Ashdown?" I whispered to Saku.

"Jensen," Saku whispered back.

"I have to agree with our Corporal. These three brothers look perfectly healthy and of sound mind. So, I am happy to, also, be responsible for their care." Saku stepped in to back up Ryoko's argument.

"You do not have the authority to say such things, Tsubaki-san."

"I do." A newcomer's voice interrupted the argument with a weary sigh.

I faced a lean woman standing before the lantern room door next to Leinard's.

She had sharp features, a short bob of fuzzy curls that tumbled unruly about her neckline and forehead, large brown eyes set with a stern expression and thin lips raised with an unimpressed snarl.

Her navy-blue knight's uniform was torn in areas of her vest and around her calves. Her left arm was held up in a sling.

The scuffed and worn down sole of her boots made me think she had been doing a lot of running. I wouldn't be surprised considering what we all went through.

"Let these knights and those men go their way, Samuel. That is my order." She gave the doctor a hard-nose command.

"Teagan Arlingdon, do you even..." Samuel was set to argue his point further, but was stopped by the woman's next set of words.

"Your kin was responsible for the troubles we experienced. If it wasn't for these brothers and Captain Aueralius's men, you'd still be under a mountain of Ratshiki shit." Teagan crudely reminded Samuel of something that was exclusively experienced by them.

"Whilst my colleague is incapacitated, as a fellow captain, I assume authority of his squad by proxy."

"Fine!" Samuel conceded.

He turned and stormed up the other end of the corridor away from us.

"Was he pouting?" I blurted.

"He's always like that when he doesn't get his way," Teagan answered.

"Thanks." Ryoko grumbled to the woman.

"Don't thank Ryoko. I only did this to shut you guys up." Teagan growled back at Ryoko. "Bloody shouting in the corridors, disturbing everyone's rest."

An awkward silence came upon the corridor.

Teagan broke the silence by asking me a question. "So you're the one that reset the labyrinth, huh?"

I frowned, perplexed. "How'd you know?"

I instinctively felt my right eye for the mapglass and remembered that I had placed it next to Trix on the stretcher earlier.

She flashed me a knowing smile. "You may have reset the labyrinth and returned the wayward residents, but you didn't reset time itself outside the Lotus Bridge. We all saw what you did through our maplinks and remember."

"Aah." The realization dawned on me.

I blushed, feeling embarrassed. Another realization hit me when I recalled her family name was Arlingdon. I wondered if she was related to Charlese.

Ryoko got us moving before we could cause another scene.

"Thank you," she bowed to Teagan.

We followed her lead out of the corridor.

When I thought I had suffered enough, I experienced another queasy journey in the labyrinth's elevator.

My legs wobbled as I stepped out into the main foyer of the Fourth Tier, but I was able to walk unassisted. If I was still wearing guns, I probably would've toppled over. My sides and back felt so much lighter without their weight.

I was glad when Colin had reclaimed his guns as soon as we had left the Lotus Bridge and stepped onto a pivot landing. He went off to reseal Moralta in a time cell, then rejoin his team to assist with their and Jensen's crowd control work in the West Wing.

"Eek!" I caught a clear image of myself in the mirror elevator doors and realized I was an eyesore.

My bow tie's red color had lost its vibrancy, parts of its edges were snagged and torn, and the ribbon flaps were almost pulled out of the

knot.

I pulled off my gray flat cap, which was more like a screwed cap with part of the visor broken so the right side of it flopped down, and shoved it in my back pants pocket.

My hands ran through my messy layers of short black hair, flicking aside brow-length stands of fringe.

Looking down, I groaned when I saw my navy vest had lost two of its bottom buttons revealing more of my untucked shirt that was definitely no longer white, but splotched with dark red and gray stains.

I sighed at the shabby sight of my worn down boots that were beyond the scuffed stage.

Looking up, I saw the slight crease lines on my forehead and felt conscious not to frown.

Man, I felt haggard.

"Can we get a drink?" I asked no one in particular. "Scratch that. Get me a keg of ale and a straw."

"Ha! I second dat!" War piped up. "Best thing yah said Famisto."

He slung his arm around my shoulder to pull me around.

The knights faced Death, War and me with sneaky grins.

"You Gat Shiem brothers like your drink, don't you? Okay, why not? Not like we're going to get more done around this place," Lita agreed. "Jensen and Orion Team already has the last bit of trouble under control."

Wilfred and Saku had also expressed agreement on the suggestion.

Ryoko gave us one of her classic hard-boiled frowns. "You're on my watch. Any funny business, I'll be handing out punishments."

She growled at the hearty slaps and pats to her back.

"Yosh! Let us do this. I think we deserve it," Saku cheerfully said.

He told us of a place where we could go to get smashed.

Ryoko dropped her tough attitude with a sigh and gestured for Saku to lead the way.

We followed him across the foyer's polished white marble floors towards enormous redwood double doors.

The afternoon sun threw elongated shadows to our footsteps. I soon realized that the area was empty of animal bots and people.

"Did the people get moved?" I asked Lita's back.

"Yes. They were evacuated back to the Second District for safety reasons. Only knights currently remain in this area," she confirmed.

I shrugged off all other questions that were forming in my head and focused on the exit.

Saku opened the double doors.

I relished the stream of daylight that rushed at my face. It felt comforting.

"Let's get smashed!" I loudly declared.

"Hai!" The others heartily agreed.

We crossed the threshold to the outside world and closed the doors to Hell's Labyrinth.

Thank you for Reading

The saga continues!

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The Gat Shiem Brothers are determined to rescue their brother Pesti, but an entity called the Pale Rider and the Illuminate Group stand in their way.

Volume 2 is out now!